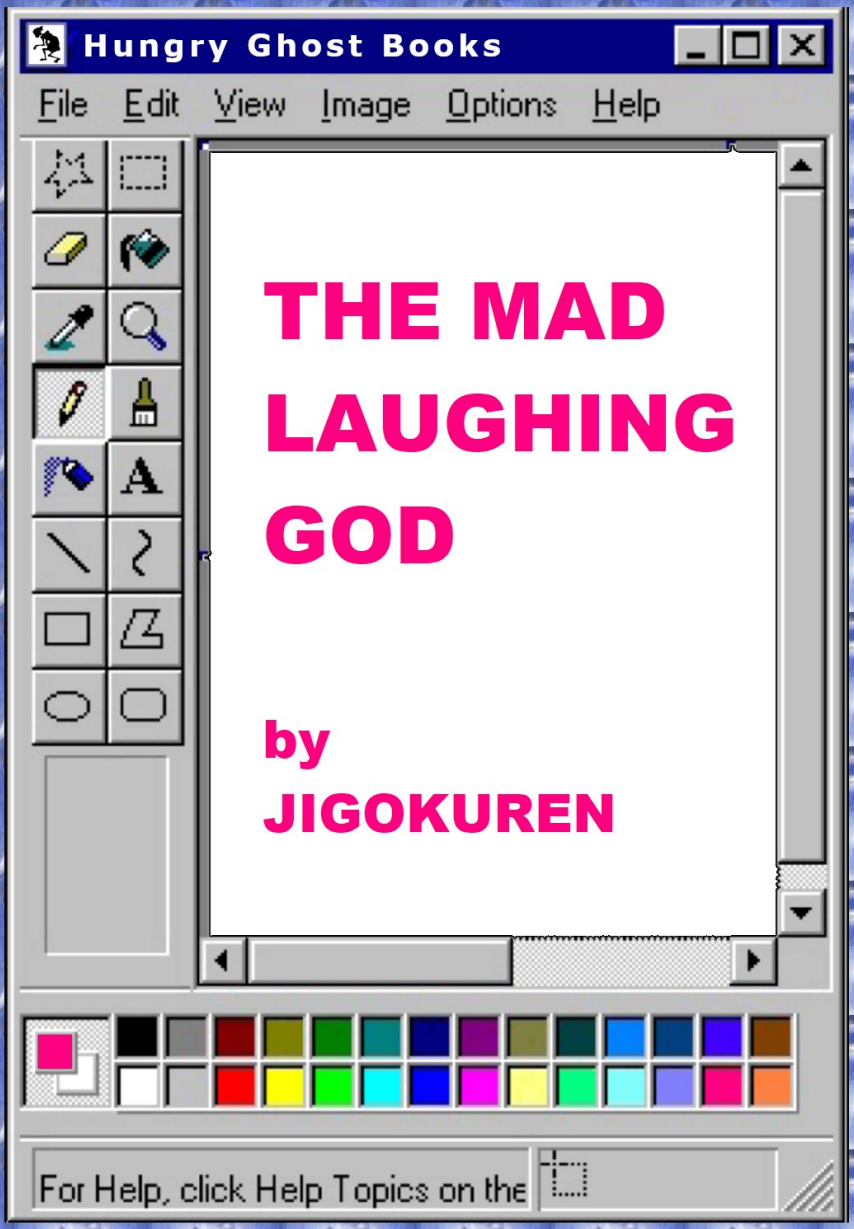
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THE MAD LAUGHING GOD

A Brief Study of the Realm of Desire and the Latter Age

by JIGOKUREN

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“I am just a copy of a copy of a copy.
Everything I say has come before.
Assembled into something, into something, into something…
I don't know for certain anymore.”

-From “Copy of a” by Nine Inch Nails

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INTRODUCTION

This essay series started out as an exploration of the confounding text “Anti-Oedipus” by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, spurred on by the creeping pervasiveness of its ideas within the memesphere and my desire to more fully understand them. However, I could not help but make connections with other philosophies and ideas, and thus spun the entire thing into a sizable interconnected web which attempts to come to a satisfying conclusion. I believe that I succeeded in this endeavor, albeit somewhat clumsily, but I will let the reader be the final judge of that.

Tackling ostensibly Leftist ideas (particularly ones which, in some cases, have sprung from the minds of outright Marxists) in such great depth, and even going so far as to agree with several of their observations, is always risky as a writer who has already established himself as being opposed to such strands of thought. People are quick to jump to conclusions these days, and are sensitive to the prospect of their presumed allies suddenly switching sides. Understandably so, as the tenuous social binds of the internet age have diminished the perceived value of trust and loyalty, leading to constant instability and defection. When everyone remains a stranger, no one is truly your friend; it’s every man for himself.

Still, after reading the texts quoted throughout this work, I couldn’t help but feel such an analysis was necessary, not because of the places where the Materialists fail in their modeling of reality, but rather

because of the places where they succeed. It is, at the end of the day, the perceived truths that are espoused which draw people in. If we are to simply ignore such observations which are increasingly pertinent to our time, it will only be to our detriment. Times are changing, and the cards are currently being reshuffled with blinding speed; blink and important details will pass you by. If one does not work to comprehend the challenges that lie ahead of us, socially, ideologically, materially, and most importantly spiritually, one will be left behind to wander the wasteland of meaningless rhetoric, a fate which seems to have befallen many as of late.

In service of this mission, I spend quite a lot of time in these essays breaking down these Materialist frameworks, and if you are someone who reflexively approaches such things with disdain (something I sympathize with), I hope you will at least indulge me and hear out my counterarguments before jumping ship. This series is first and foremost a rejection of Materialism, even if it does take time to appreciate the intellectual rigor of some Leftist thought. If I were actually a Materialist, I wouldn't be able to in good faith call myself a Buddhist, as Buddhism outright rejects the view that the material world which we humans comprehend is the most essential component of existence.

Speaking of Buddhism, the thought has occurred to me that some may even be surprised to find that this

is foremost a Buddhist book, or at least a book written from a predominantly Buddhist perspective, and I have given some consideration to why I have reached such an assumption. Buddhism, being for the most part still something of a novelty in the Western world despite the propagation of its hollowed-out castrated forms, is conventionally presumed to be entirely alien to the reader in publications written by Western authors. I have made no such presumption in the writing of this work and instead treat Buddhist terminology and ideas as a shared analytical lens.

This does not mean that one unfamiliar with the many facets of Buddhism will not be able to understand the greater picture presented by these essays, but some of the color and nuance may be lost to them. With this in mind, I encourage readers to research terms and concepts that they are unfamiliar with in order to make themselves better acquainted with them. Not only is this beneficial in introducing people to Buddhist ideas, which is indeed a primary goal of mine, but it also works to accelerate memetic mutation within the dissident infosphere. It's important to adopt modes of communication outside of that which is impressed upon us by the forces that be, and the more variation that is added to the bubbling cauldron of the collective consciousness, the better equipped we will be going forward.

Considering this, I have also used this series as an opportunity to shake up my own writing style, and

readers of my prior work may notice this fairly quickly. Although I would not say that it is a truly radical departure from my prior essays, it does exude a noticeably different feeling to go along with the different subject matter. I felt that this change in style was partially necessary in order to meet the idiosyncrasies of the source texts at least half-way, but it was done more out of ideological reasons than anything else.

There seems to be a tendency within our society for writers who try to communicate complex ideas, particularly those of a sociological or philosophical bent, to default to a marketable scholarly or professional tone. The result of this is a widespread homogenization of style, converging onto a bland and uninspiring TED-talk affectation that is very easily mimicked by generative AI models like Chat GPT. I feel that those who don't push the language they use will fail to transcend the slop-filled world we live in and will ultimately be subsumed by the pulsating blob of the infosphere, ultimately indistinguishable from the edgeless derivative sludge texts produced by artificial intelligence and thus made entirely obsolete. Those who do not evolve will lose.

Readers will also notice frequent appeals to generating a newfound sense of vitality in these pages, which was another very conscious decision that I made shortly after I began work on this project, and is connected with my previous point about evolution. As a Buddhist who has been watching the mainstream Buddhist publications from afar for years now, my

frustration has accumulated over time, and I needed a way to sufficiently communicate it in textual form.

I had already dedicated an entire chapter of my book “Devadata, who was a good friend…” to dismantling the corpo-friendly pseudo-Buddhist “spirituality” we see promoted everywhere these days, that pervasive and pernicious chimera whose primary icon is the photo of a young woman sitting on a yoga mat smiling with her eyes closed. However, my words on the topic here attempt to go deeper into this phenomenon; to dissect it and find out what exactly makes its heart pump and, more importantly, to work out a potential strategy for countering it.

Part of my ultimate conclusion, if I may spoil it for you here just a little, is that a severe lack of vitality and a pervasive sense of complacency have set in via the machinations of the hegemonic neoliberal system and the “entrepreneurial-self” it has imposed upon us, and that Buddhists must push against these prevailing attitudes if there is to be any shift in the greater public consciousness. Unless we do away with these first amongst ourselves, nothing of any true significance will be possible. We must abandon the moth-eaten assumptions of the market-driven zeitgeist and liberate ourselves from the shackles of dull marketability and empty consumerism.

Accomplishing this will assuredly ruffle some feathers, and may even draw the ire of some in the Western Buddhist establishment, but their project is

overall more obviously geriatric and ineffectual than ever before. A certain friction in this regard should be embraced insofar as it is in service of liberating the Buddha-dharma from the stifling box it has been shoved into. One does not challenge a decadent and lethargic status quo without offending some sensibilities, and it is pure folly to think otherwise. Moreover, agreeableness is not in itself a virtue or synonymous with Buddhist notions of “compassion,” and over-agreeable will get us nowhere, as we will inevitably just “agree” ourselves into the same moribund state of affairs as before. It will do you well to remember this.

Before I end this introduction, I want to note that, due to the need to address the creep of technology over our lives/minds and ideologies like Accelerationism, which can viewed as particularly dismal and pessimistic to the casual observer, there is a fairly dark and ominous tone to this work as a whole (at least more so than my previous writings). If you find yourself somewhat distressed by the propositions presented in relation to these topics, I encourage you to read through to the final part where I explain why I am perhaps more optimistic than most regarding our future.

It is quite common these days for individuals of the younger generations to feel lost and hopeless when it comes to the future, and many of the more outspoken Conservative-minded people of our age (particularly those among the older crowd) tend to meet this with a certain abrasiveness, a “stop whining and take it like a

man" attitude that is usually quite counterproductive. Before we can start solving the issues of modernity, it is necessary to accept that they exist in the first place, and that simply powering through them is not going to assure a better life for those who come after us.

The fact that some things are becoming more difficult and life has become more complex is not simply in the minds of younger generations, but an observable fact that we need to wrestle with. If you are someone who has benefitted by the systems of the past, it's understandable that you may not want things to change, but you must also realize that circumstances have already changed, and the world that you once knew is long gone. There is no turning the clock back. That does not mean that old ideas are never valuable, man still has the same essential needs that he had a century ago despite some Positivist claims to the contrary, but what is required going forward is not a retraction, rather it is a synthesis where said ideas can be effectively reconfigured and translated into a form that is more conducive to life in the modern world.

Others may embrace the ever-increasing demands of the economy and adopt a "hustle and grind" mindset that indulges in the inescapable hyper-consumerism of our age; working in tandem with the stream rather than against it. While I can see the utility in such things, I believe that these people will only burn themselves out and fall into despair once they realize there is no end to the treadmill of the increasingly digital

information-based economy, and that the material goods they've slaved away to afford will not bring them lasting satisfaction. There are plenty of wealthy and attractive people who end up melting their brains with a myriad of drugs and end up taking the ladder out once they've fully succumbed to creeping dissatisfaction with nihilistic existence. People who fall into this line of thinking eventually find out that the wanting never ceases. The purest form of desire is, after all, the pursuit of that which does not exist, and there is no limit to its scope.

I hope that people who have internalized the above described views read the essays here with an open mind and heart. I think that if they do so, they may come to the realization that they have been missing the forest for the trees; focusing on the issues that have disrupted their own bubble to the detriment of more profound truth and understanding. One of the great challenges of our time is that people do not usually know what they are missing until they find it, yet they still realize that they lack something, thus they end up wandering further off into the darkness, grasping at whatever they can. If I can remedy that to even a small extent, then all of the time and energy I have poured into my writing will be worthwhile.

With all of that said, I want to thank from the bottom of my heart anyone who reads my work and gives it serious consideration. I know that people have increasingly limited free time these days (for reasons I

will outline in great detail in Part 3 of this essay series), so I appreciate when anyone decides to allocate some of that precious free time to my writing. I sincerely hope you find some value in the words written here, and that they awaken thoughts and feelings that can alter your life for the better, even if only in some small way.

-JIGOKUREN

PART I: THE WEEPING MACHINE

The heart rate monitor beeps loudly in Jimmy's hospital room, connected to his chest via cables of metal and rubber. The IV slow-drips saline straight into his bloodstream from the IV bag hanging above him and to the side of his bed, while the catheter inserted into his urethra collects the urine from his bladder. The tube inserted into his throat expands his lungs with air pumped in via the humming contraption beside him. In and out, regulated in-flow and out-flow. Through this, he is kept alive, although unconscious. A meat puppet hung upon strings of metal and rubber.

Through the outlets on the walls, electricity/fire flows into the machines, converging with the other three elements in the midst of the element of space (4+1=5) throughout which Jimmy's consciousness moves unhindered, transmigrating the realms rapidly with every moment and identifying itself with the stored memories and habit energy residing in his mind.

The entire picture appears cohesive, but like all things in our universe, it breaks down upon close inspection. At first, all is connected as part of a greater whole. Like an impressionist painting, it's a familiar sight, readily identifiable to the average person. But move closer and the impressions begin to separate, suddenly alien in their form; indiscernible as a concrete reflection of reality. Move even closer still, and the dividing lines between each color remain fuzzy and obscure. It's difficult to discern where one ends and another begins, and the observer is hit with the

realization that what they have been examining was truly a cohesive whole the entire time.

It's clear that philosophers and Materialists of all stripes have battled with these ever-baffling truths for centuries, or even millennia. How does the puzzle fit together, and how should we apply our explanations as a heuristic throughout our lives? People can articulate observations and we can see for ourselves that the observations are true, but there's a difference between a signal and noise. The deeper meaning remains elusive, and thus we find ourselves perpetually dissatisfied and fumbling blindly in the darkness.

Man seeks to know himself, but even the "self" fuzzes out and turns to static when one begins picking it apart into pieces: the body, the organs, the mind, the various elements… the soul? In which of any of these does one locate "the self," and what exactly is its nature. Moreover, like Jimmy in his comatose state, we have found ourselves inseparable from the environment around us. We breathe the air and eat food derived from the natural world, and our very existence is derived from those who came before us. There has been no point at which we've been entirely independent organisms. Like the expressionist painting, the "self" seems to change and shift depending on the position from which it is observed; an existential parallax. Therefore, how could one even begin to locate a pure and untainted "self" within the tangled mass of infinite interconnectedness? How farcical…

Due to this frustratingly complex nature of things, humans turn to things like religion, philosophy, and ideology. We boil them down, apply metaphysics and theories, and place our faith in them. What other choice do we have? But these frameworks are not created equal. One must always value their framework of choice over the others. If that were not the case, why apply it in the first place?

But there is also the corollary that we are not rational beings and do not usually select our frameworks through rational assessment, rather they are bestowed upon us by prior generations; the oppression of the future by the past. It's through this process that most in our modern era have landed on secular Rationalist or Materialist frameworks with Eternalist and/or Annihalationist elements, and because they were made to adopt these first, other perspectives inevitably become antagonistic. Once relied upon for one's operation in the world, a framework becomes a pillar of one's "self-image" and, due to our natural tendency towards consistency of self-image, we are automatically put on the defense; a stalwart warrior on behalf of the status quo. It is our "selves" at stake, after all, despite our eternal inability to fully define such a supposedly ever-present spectre.

In order to avoid any existential fugue state through which "self" and meaning may shift dramatically, some may avoid questioning the fundamentals of their worldview through their entire

lives. Contrary to this, others may jump from worldview to worldview, framework to framework, in desperate search of something that can give them a reason to keep pushing onward through the suffering innate to human existence; some magical muse that can be the source of constant inspiration and drive. Tangled up in the web of contradictions and philosophical conundrums that never seem to be fully resolved through shallow spiritual and philosophical exploration, these types often find themselves in intense psychological distress.

When one simply defines their “self” by the cause, egregore, or philosophical strand they’ve latched onto, it is inevitable that such a “self” will be shattered time and time again, and the individual in question will find that they’ve only drifted further away from the answers they seek. Those who do not question never truly live, but those who find no stable grounding die time and time again; two extremes of the realm of desire. Whether things remain stagnant or flowing ever onward, the wheel of existence never stops turning. Time moves forward, and suffering compounds. Where is our promised release?

Traditionally, humans have used religion as a means to explain the cosmos and their place within it. Post-industrialization, however, this fell out of style and was replaced with frameworks which insisted that they needed no divine supernatural power in order to make sense. Thus “the material should take precedence over what cannot be scientifically proven” became the axiom

under which the world I was born into operated. However, when that which is transcendental is thrown into the garbage and the material is designated the end-all-be-all, a certain nihilism tends to creep in. “My suffering has not been extinguished and my desire is unfulfilled,” we may think, but we’re always assured by our compatriots that whatever framework we are operating under is far better than the alternatives.

Humanity, however, has grown listless. Everywhere I go, people are craving more than this. Even if they have not yet realized what it is they are lacking, the feeling that something simply isn’t right lingers within them, although most insist on clinging to flawed modern notions of “self” unquestioningly up until the topic of one’s mortality is raised. The question of self-nature, after all, is often the unwelcome spectre in the hallway at the top of the stairs at night briefly spotted at the corner of one’s vision, while oncoming death is the midnight rap at one’s window while they’re fast asleep on the second floor.

Thus new ideas enter the collective memescape and quickly mutate. Some become unrecognizable while others fade out in favor of other concepts. Memetic evolution, it seems, has picked up its pace in the digital age and is breeding strange new monsters; shambling egregores of all shapes and colors vomiting snakes and spewing hot iron, searching for the next poor soul to set foot upon their blood-soaked plates.

One ideology which has taken root in the consciousnesses of the intellectually curious is Accelerationism, which has been heavily influenced by the writings of Nick Land, as well as the 1972 book “Anti-Oedipus,” written by the French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The French duo, in their attempt to take Marxist Materialism to its extreme conclusions while addressing the lack of explanatory power in Marx’s theories, opted to break reality down into its most basic machinic elements.

The most essential function of a machine, according to the labyrinthian text of Anti-Oedipus, is that of regulating “flow.” Returning to the machine’s in Jimmy’s hospital room, we can observe this in action. Air is pushed into his lungs before being expelled, while the streams of saline into his body and urine out of it work in a similar manner. Moreover, the electricity supplied to these devices is also a “flow” piped into the hospital building through power lines and, via the outlets in Jimmy’s room, to the life-support devices themselves.

But Deleuze and Guattari go much further than that. It is not only these devices that can be considered “machines,” but Jimmy’s body is also made up of machines, just ones of a different chemical makeup; constructed from flesh, blood, and bone rather than rubber and metal. “... The anus and the flow of shit it cuts off,” the pair offers as an example. They continue: “the mouth that cuts off not only the flow of milk but also

the flow of air and sound; the penis that interrupts not only the flow of urine but also the flow of sperm."

The machines combine with the hospital machines in one uninterrupted line, and upon viewing them through this machinic lens, there is little difference between them; they are just different components of one total process that extends from Jimmy, to the hospital room's power outlet, to the power lines, to the power plant, to the generators, to the coal flowing in, to the trucks that deliver that coal, to the mines, etcetera etcetera until the entire world of global production is implicated.

And this has been consistent throughout Jimmy's life, ever since he was a suckling babe. "The breast is a machine that produces milk, and the mouth a machine coupled to it," Deleuze and Guattari tell us. The root force pushing all of this along, they say, is "desire." From the first chapter of Anti-Oedipus:

> Desire constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented. Desire causes the current to flow, itself flows in turn, and breaks the flows. "I love everything that flows, even the menstrual flow that carries away the seed unfecund." Amniotic fluid spilling out of the sac and kidney stones; flowing hair; a flow of spittle, a flow of sperm, shit, urine that are

> produced by partial objects and constantly cut off by other partial objects, which in turn produce other flows, interrupted by other partial objects. [1]

Here we have the core duality to Deleuze and Guattari's Materialist theory of everything: flow, and the cutting-off of flow / production and anti-production / yes and no / machinic desire and "the body without organs." It's the last entry of this list that befuddles scholars of Anti-Oedipus the most, as the text does not make it abundantly clear what exactly it IS. While seemingly a metaphysical force at first, the "body without organs" is given an essential place within the syncretic psychological framework Deleuze and Guattari have constructed. It can be conceptualized as that part of the "human machine" which views itself in opposition to the parts and pieces that keep it functioning (i.e. organs).

As a corporate entity might take on an antagonistic relationship towards the workers who are its lifeblood, the "body without organs" rebels against its physical makeup, revolted by its own putrid stench and wet quivering viscera, it senses "larvae and loathsome worms" throughout its soft physical makeup and yearns for a release from the tortured existence as a squishy biological machine designed to suffer and fall apart. The breakdown of a machine, after all, is just another function through this lens. Pleasure and pain, coupling and decoupling, birth and death… "Merely so many

nails piercing the flesh, so many forms of torture." [1] But the anti-productive tendencies of the "body without organs" are not the end of production. Like a sausage-slicing machine, there is a moment where the flow of meat is cut off, yet it returns again and again. In this way, the forces of production and anti-production move in tandem throughout human existence.

It's worth noting that these ideas are not new. Shakyamuni Buddha, the marvelous skilled physician, taught meditation on the charnel ground and contemplation of the repulsiveness of the body in order to cure those who had been consumed by desire for transient worldly pleasures. However, he also clearly communicated his worry that people would grow to despise the world and retreat from it entirely, which was not his intention. Rather than crave existence, or "becoming," it was possible for the opposite craving to arise: the craving for "non-existence" or "non-becoming." He says in the Itivuttaka:

> Some, feeling horrified, humiliated, & disgusted with that very becoming, relish non-becoming: "When this self, at the break-up of the body, after death, perishes & is destroyed, and does not exist after death, that is peaceful, that is exquisite, that is sufficiency!" [2]

These two cravings, although seemingly opposite, stem from the same root of ignorance. Craving for existence/becoming arises from lust and illusory Eternalist views, while non-existence/non-becoming is derived from hatred and fallacious Annihilationism. “Bhikkhus, all is burning,” Shakyamuni Buddha says in his famous “fire sermon.” He continues: “Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hate, with the fire of delusion.” [3]

These three passions rest at the very core of samsaric existence, often depicted in Tibetan bhavachakra mandalas as a trio of animals; a cock, a snake, and a boar constantly chasing each other in a circle of aimless wandering, never knowing even a moment of peace. Around them are the six paths of reincarnation: Hell, the Realm of Hungry Ghosts, the Realm of Beasts, the Human Realm, The Asura Realm, and the Heavens. On the outer rim of the mandala is Yama, the lord of death, tightly gripping the wheel constructed of untold suffering and oceans of blood.

The realms of existence too reflect the Deleuzian binary of machinic desire. They are, after all, collectively referred to as the “desire” realm. It is ignorance and desire, above all, that make up their very root system. The flow state of unchained becoming can be witnessed in the realms of hell, where beings are killed and reincarnated countless times, over and over again. Representative of this is the “Hell of Repetition,” wherein beings are fitted with metal blades and forced

to wander the blasted wastes. Should they encounter each other, they instantly attack, crying in both agony and blind fury as they hack each other into pieces; cleaving through chunks of flesh and sawing at each other's bones. Once all of the beings have been eviscerated, the hell wardens yell “revive, revive!” and bring them all back to life for the process to repeat itself. Constant disassembling and reassembling of the human “machine,” with not a single moment of respite; only the unending agony of slicing knives and hot iron spikes driven through one’s flesh and marrow.

The heavens too are not free of desire, but unlike the realms of hell, they are stagnant. The Japanese Shingon school patriarch Kukai compared the mindset of those born in the heavens to “Buddhists who loathe the human world and of ordinary people who long for heaven,” which correspond to the heresies of Annihilationism and Eternalism respectively (but are not necessarily identical with either). [4] They may act with outward virtue, but inwardly they hold scorn for the world and wish merely to escape their painful ephemeral existence as a human, aging and falling apart more with each passing day. Their own reeking body revolts them, yet often the thought of perishing and falling into the void of non-existence still fills them with dread. So they attempt to retreat from this world by locking themselves away in the gilded palaces at the top of Mt. Sumeru; turning their backs on the realm of

desire, but still keeping hideous passions burning in their hearts.

While these beings may be under the assumption that they have achieved something akin to “enlightenment,” they are still far from the correct path. “It is not that they understand emptiness and non-emptiness, permanence and annihilation,” the Buddha Mahavairocana says to Vajrasattva in the Mahavairocana Sutra. “With regard to both nonexistence and non-nothingness, they consider what they discriminate to be without discrimination. How is one to discriminate emptiness? They do not know the varieties of emptiness, and [so] they will never be able to know nirvana.” [4]

To put it simply, these beings are still locked into flawed Materialist thinking in regards to their supposed enlightenment and cannot let go of their illusory worldly preconceptions, therefore they always return to the dreaded lower realms of existence. Many fall into the depths of hell and work their way back up to human existence once their positive karma has been expended. If they’re lucky, they may instead be reborn as a diseased mule or a blind beggar.

It’s fair to say that Shakyamuni knew well the perils associated with all forms of passion, and what he sought to guide other sentient beings towards was something outside of the extremes. His ambition was a lofty one: IIf he could cure ignorance and lead others towards realizing the truth of the cosmos and their place

within, he could extinguish their suffering. For once, beings could truly be at ease.

However, this presented him with a problem. Shakyamuni wanted to communicate his realizations with the rest of the world, but what he had realized was something outside of samsaric experience; beyond the bounds of worldly desire. How does one teach such a thing to beings whose whole perception of reality has been shaped by the wheel of samsara from the moment they were born? How do you begin to explain something that is essentially a negation of everything one knows?

There is no frame of reference for such a concept, and thus Shakyamuni Buddha began the arduous task of applying all the means at his disposal in pursuit of his goal, assessing the proclivities and capacities of all the beings he met in order to tailor his explanations in a way that would resonate with them. The lasting record of this endeavor makes up the scriptural texts of the Buddhist canon; Shakyamuni Buddha's intention manifested into preservable form and spread throughout the world. Truly a magnificent legacy.

However, the barriers of Shakyamuni's goal remain, and they have only grown more insurmountable as we move further away from Shakyamuni's time while trying to contend with his many teachings. While some aspects of life have gotten easier with the advancement of technology and the abundance afforded to us by

rapidly expanding capitalist production, circumstances are also more difficult in many respects. Life has become more complex and complicated in ways that I will cover in depth in a later essay. While many of our basic needs are met, we have only fallen deeper into the grasp of the Demon King of the Sixth Heaven: Mara, the Evil One, who has claimed the Desire Realm as his domain.

Due to humanity's existence within the seemingly impenetrable haze of the passions of ignorance, lust, and hatred, it seems fitting to me that the Buddha-dharma is always portrayed in the esoteric texts as a sort of intruder. Yamantaka, the Destroyer of Death, for instance, intrudes upon Yama's domain in the underworld. Adorned with a garland of bleeding severed heads and carrying swords and staves in his many arms, he stomps on the gates to the death lord's abode, terrifying him into submission with his fierce blue-black heads, the eyes of which see into all realms of existence at once. There is nothing that escapes the blazing gaze of Yamantaka, and nowhere he cannot appear in an instant. Blink and suddenly he's before you in his terrible flame-wreathed glory.

Trailokyavijaya, who takes the form of a multi-armed Asura (i.e. demi-god), also intruded upon the heavenly palaces at the top of Mt. Sumeru during an era where the gods had become completely corrupted by the passions, sending the world into disarray. Making a victory seal with his crossed arms, he materialized

directly in front of Mahesvara, he who named himself lord of all the realms, and before Mahesvara could react, stomped him into the ground. Within an instant, Mahesvara found himself reincarnated as a fully-enlightened Buddha, lord of a pure Buddha field adorned with ash (Bhasma-alankara, “Ash Decoration”).

In both of these cases, the enlightened dharma protectors who subjugate the worldly deities seem to be outsiders arriving from a realm beyond the worlds of desire. However, they have always been here and always will be, for the realm they reside in is the foundational consciousness of the cosmos. It is not separate from us and our world, but integral to it, surviving even as our existence constantly crumbles to dust like the remnants of a burning house; not of desiring production or anti-production, but that which transcends either, ungraspable to those who insist on clinging to the material.

It is ineffable, but always right before us, visible only to those whose virtue and spiritual understanding have evolved to a sufficient enough level. “This world of ours is ever pure…” says Shakyamuni to Shariputra in the Vimalakirti Sutra. “Yet to save beings of inferior capacities is this wicked and impure world shown. As when the gods take their food from one and the same treasure-bowl, yet the lustre of food is different according to their virtues, so, O Sariputra, if one is pure in mind, then he can see the qualities of this world adorned.” [5]

Even if we return to the example of Jimmy laying comatose in his hospital room, we may find elements that transcend that of Deleuze and Guattari's machinic desire. What, for instance, drives his fiancee to visit him night after night, weeping in silent hope that he will become healthy and happy once again. Shall we think of her as merely a "weeping machine," with the eye being a machine that allows and cuts off the flow of tears, or is there perhaps something more at play? And what about the man who was struck by Jimmy's car at the time of the accident who, still conscious, also visits Jimmy's hospital room despite the fact that Jimmy's intoxicated driving was the cause of all of this. Where do these fit into the schema of desire and production?

As we consider this framework, cracks begin to show and we find more and more examples that dumbfound it. Take, for instance, the story of the Silver Colored Woman from the Silver Colored Woman Sutra, who severed her own breasts to feed a starving woman and her child. We could view this as simply the work of anti-productive forces; the rejection of the body and its components used in the processes of production, but this explanation ignores the obvious act of incredible compassion that the breasts were severed in service of. It's this kind of utterly selfless compassion that Shakyamuni Buddha wished to illustrate when he praised the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara in the Lotus Sutra, for it is not only the bodhisattva that he intended to praise, but all things that Avalokiteshvara

represented: the man who nurses a dying animal back to health for nothing in exchange, or one who takes the time to mourn and say a prayer at an unmarked grave. Avalokiteshvara's many manifestations, so to speak.

Creeping in the darkened corners of our transient reality is something else, that which is outside of our mundane understanding, watching without judgment. In Japanese Tendai school temples, it's said there used to be an icon of a mysterious god. No one knows exactly where the god originated, or what he was meant to represent, but at one point it was considered important to appease him with praise and dance in order for one to ascend to the pure land of the Buddhas after death. This god, whose name is Matara, takes the appearance of an old man, laughing as he beats a drum.

Why exactly does this seemingly mad god laugh? Perhaps it's because he watches us scramble around the wheel of samsara year after year, decade after decade, and century after century, in eternal pursuit of our desires, flailing through this illusory reality without realizing that we're weaving together our own dismal fates, and he laughs because he knows. He understands all of it, and beats his drum to communicate the wisdom of the Buddha-dharma. The drum beat is ever so soft, almost imperceptible, but it reverberates through all of space and time. If you listen, you may be able to hear it.

One awake who sits beside one who is still dreaming and mumbling nonsense to themselves will

invariably find it amusing. They may even speak to the other person, giving them hints to their true unconscious state, chuckling to themselves as they do so. Perhaps that is one explanation for why the mad god laughs as he dances and beats his drum in the darkness…

The question remains, however: if humans have grown to reject their own organs and desire a release from them, could the same happen to humans once the egregores we work for are able to materialize their own horrible forms, bearing hundreds of quivering heads and wielding spears of terrible crackling flame? Wouldn't they too feel a disgust for the parts that sustain them (i.e. us?). To consider this further, we must take a look at the dimension of time.

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PART II: THE HEADLESS FLAME

Off on the horizon, I see a factory spilling out plastic garbage into a massive heap on the concrete outside. Semi-trucks back into the docks to refuel the complex with oil and other raw materials before departing; worker bees returning to the pulsating hive again and again with their bounty. The cheap plastic widgets pile up until the mound is the size of a modest hill, but the flow does not slow down. Unceasing, it continues for some unknown purpose, the factory belts and gears turning ever-onward with a strange intoxicating hum.

As the production increases, birds of various kinds plummet from the sky, landing with dull thuds among the plastic wasteland and becoming part of it as the plastic continues to pile up on top of them; a smooth multi-colored grave with no headstone. One after the other, they fall, land, and disappear into the grotesque artificial mountain as it increases in size, swallowing up the land around it.

Eventually the throbbing factory building is consumed by the flowing mass of plastic, along with all of the trucks and the roads they drove on, but production does not slow. Instead, plastic waste keeps on spilling forth until the quivering mass meets with other amoebic flows of plastic produced by other factories, joining together to create a sea of colorful plastic garbage and reeking decaying flesh.

The mass takes on a mind of its own, crawling forth into the meadows and valleys and consuming

whatever it encounters there, integrating it into itself and further growing in size. As it grows, its pace quickens, until it resembles a mighty dust storm overtaking a desert; sweeping down like furious retribution from the scorned heavens and laying waste to everything in its path.

Too soon it reaches the ocean, and spills forth into the cold frothy waters. The fish and seaweed pose no opposition as it claims dominion over them, filling up as much space as possible and perpetuating its momentum for as long as it possibly can. The plastic amoebas crawl and crawl, grow and grow, forming sores and rashes on the surface of the Earth, consuming all for an entirely unknown purpose. All is fuel, all is fire, until the last trace is burnt out.

In Japanese mythology, the creation of the Japanese archipelago was credited to the gods Izanami-no-Mikoto and Izanagi-no-Mikoto. The two create the islands using a jeweled spear before populating the Earth with their many divine children. This process was cut short by the erupting forth of the terrible flame deity Hi-no-Kagutsuchi from Izanami-no-Mikoto's womb. Immediately after his birth, he began searing and consuming the flesh of his own mother. [1]

Izanagi-no-Mikoto, in order to save his sister, severed Kagutsuchi's head. The flame deity's attack was effectively halted, but Izanami-no-Mikoto's injuries proved fatal, and she descended to the underworld

where her still-animated corpse gave birth to storm gods and demons of various shapes and sizes. [2]

This tale is outwardly the corruption of a divine feminine, who is transfigured from a bestower of life and order into one who births chaos and fear. That is the obvious reading. However, if one examines Kagutsuchi closer, a different dimension begins to emerge. Kagutsuchi is the product of the two creation deities, yet he is also something primordial; not entirely separate from Izanagi-no-Mokoto and Izanami-no-Mikoto, but rather a force that was always raging below the surface, ever since the primordial cosmic egg separated into the heavens and the earth (if the ancient Chinese creation myth is to be assumed true).

From the order of the earliest gods, Kagutsuchi ruptured forth like a virus onto the flesh of the diseased, not a force opposed to nature but rather a product entirely of it; the cosmic machine breaking down as part of its function. After Izanagi-no-Mikoto travels into the underworld and flees at the horrid visage of his once beautiful sister, he returns to the surface and cleanses himself in a nearby river. The result of this is the birth of three more divine children: Amaterasu-Okami, Susanoo-no-Mikoto, and Tsukuyomi-no-Mikoto, who can be said to represent the sun, earth, and moon respectively.

While Amaterasu-Okami is a bringer of order throughout much of recorded Japanese mythology, Susanoo-no-Mikoto, who was likely syncretized with the

syncretic plague god Gozu Tenno (the Ox-headed Emperor) at some point, manifests the chaos and might of the natural world. Even among these cherished children, that destructive primordial power still remains. Summer and winter give way to the changes of fall and spring, and the wildfires clear the way for new life to take hold. Order, destruction, and the inevitable return, always rearing their heads. The very first act of creation, after all, is said to have been a great rending.

Of course it goes without saying that Kagutsuchi's beheading did not spell his death, rather he continues on, headless, working within the natural world; a representative of that ever-present push towards creative destruction and change. Sometimes his work can forge new tools of order. For instance, his beheading resulted in the birth of the sword/thunder deity Takemikazuchi (aka Kashima-no-Kami), who famously became an enforcer for Amaterasu-Okami. However, there is always some element of destruction in his production.

The ancient Japanese seem to have feared fire, and rightfully so. Their wooden abodes were incredibly flammable, after all (any scholar of Japanese Buddhism would know that there are few centuries-old temples which have not been razed to the ground at least once). It says a lot that, although there were other terrifying deities which represented destructive forces of nature (e.g. the "Raijin" storm gods or the dragon kings of the

great ocean), it was Kagutsuchi, the deity of blazing flame, who was the first to appear.

As destructive as the force of flame is, human civilization can also be viewed as the increasingly complex utilization of it in service of meeting our desires. Long ago, weapons and armor were forged in flame. With the advent of the industrial revolution, steam became a widespread source of power, which gave way to the application of fossil fuels; the black blood of the earth, which can be viewed in parallel with the divine creative power of Kagutsuchi's blood in Japanese mythology.

This unfolding eventually led to our current technological age, wherein fossil fuels and atomic energy (yet another form of Kagutsuchi, both destructive and productive in terrifyingly powerful ways) generate the electricity that flows through the artificial minds of countless computers and special purpose devices of all kinds. Kagutsuchi, in a sense, has integrated himself into our lives in unprecedented ways, with our health and lifestyles constantly maintained by the machines he powers and our smartphones becoming an extension of our very brains. There is no corner of our modern existence that does not smell of his touch.

However, as the systems maintaining this state of affairs become more complex, and the entities governing, creating, and maintaining them become more opaque and difficult to comprehend in their

totality, a new form of Kagutsuchi begins to take shape, one with profound implications on not only our material lives, but our spiritual ones as well.

We live in a system that pushes the idea of the entrepreneurial-self; man as atomized business entities which must sell themselves based on their utility within the increasingly complex maze of our slopciety. It is not only plastic consumer goods or foodstuffs that are made available on the market, rather the importance of information often supersedes such physical commodities. In order to make himself competitive, man must place himself as a conduit in the information economy, serving as a device within the whole of the greater machine; like a neuron inside of a massive ethereal brain that belongs to… something.

But this endeavor does not cease when one has left their workplace or logged off of their remote work applications. Our plethora of electronic communication media assures that we will remain connected to this matrix at every waking moment, and eventually perhaps even our non-waking moments as well (stay tuned, I guess). This idea of information-based labor can even extend to the viewing of advertisements. Indeed, people are often provided with goods or services in exchange for viewing ads, indicating that the cognition-time model of work applies in the same way. The ever-ballooning demand for information, combined with this constant presence of economic expectations on participants, has

led to a collective cracking of the human psyche, with profound implications on the popular cosmic worldview.

For now, our collective societal consciousness is held together with duct tape and superglue while the flames of Kagutsuchi continue to lick at it, singeing the edges a deep searing-hot black. All the while the machinations of economies which demand constant growth in the bulk of physical production, the already massive information trade, and the processing ability of artificial intelligence models continue on unabated, leading towards something we cannot even fathom at our present moment in time.

Like Izanami-no-Mikoto, we have collectively birthed a beast intent on consuming us, and now demons abound throughout the lands. However, any divine blade with which the beast could be dismembered was either discarded long ago or disintegrated in the beast's white-hot flame, thus Mara has made our realm his domain and the spirits all continue to descend into madness. The Benevolent King sutra says:

> When a nation becomes disordered, it is the spirits that first show signs of rampancy. Because the spirits become rampant, all the people of the nation become disordered. Invaders come to plunder the country, and the common people face annihilation. The ruler, the

> high ministers, the crown prince, the other princes, and the hundred officials all quarrel with one another over right and wrong. Heaven and earth manifest prodigies and strange occurrences; the twenty-eight constellations, the stars, and the sun and moon appear at irregular times and in irregular positions; and numerous outlaws rise up. [3]

But should we take a swing and try to predict future developments, what exactly can we imagine? Certainly there will be breakdowns, painful ones, but breakdowns that will inevitably be integrated into the process of production. Evolution, it can be said, does not happen without the death of a few trillion organisms. But will there be a collapse resulting in technological setbacks and a dramatic restructuring of human civilization? Some technological singularity that swallows humanity whole? A planetary death? Will we revert to an ape-like state and fight World War III with piles of shit?

Maybe the mad laughing god Matara, from his vantage point in the darkness, knows something we do not. Mankind continues pushing ever onward into the inky black darkness of the future, while Matara has made such darkness his abode. He sits in it, playing his drum for the worthy to hear, all the while watching and observing, letting the ages rise and fall. The vast web of

karmic causation that creates our world is made clear in his enlightened state; the beginning, middle, end, and return all come into focus. The truth is all so simple, if only the ignorant had eyes to see. Perhaps that is one explanation for why he laughs.

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PART III: ART IS OVER

In the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, it was a given that the future would be a dark and perilous time. Scripture called the time we currently live in “the age of decline in the Dharma,” or simply “the Latter Age.” “When the Dharma is about to perish, all the gods will begin to weep,” Shakyamuni said in a scriptural text entitled “The Buddha Speaks the Ultimate Extinction of the Dharma Sutra.” He continues describing the Latter Age thus:

> Rivers will dry up and the five grains will not ripen. Pestilences will frequently take millions of lives. The masses will toil and suffer while the local officials will plot and scheme. No one will adhere to principles. Instead, the human race will multiply, becoming like the sands of the ocean-bed. Good persons will be hard to find; at most there will be one or two. As the eon comes to a close, the revolutions of the sun and the moon will grow short and the lifespan of people will decrease. Their hair will turn white by the time they are forty. [1]

What first signifies the arrival of this time period, however, is the corruption of the Buddha-dharma, with the supposed clergy becoming the worst offenders. “Demonic beings will become shramanas; they will pervert and destroy my teachings,” he claimed in the

same sutra referenced above. “Monastics will wear the garb of laypersons and will prefer handsome clothes. Their precept sashes will be made of multi-colored cloth. They will use intoxicants, eat meat, kill other beings and they will indulge in their desire for flavorful food. They will lack compassion and they will bear hatred and exhibit jealousy even among themselves.” [1]

In the Nirvana Sutra, he adds the colorful description that these wicked and opportunistic monks-in-name-only will look “like hunters” who “move about with their eyes narrowed,” and claims that they will “lie down to sleep in their own excrement,” a hyperbolic illustration of unsightly and unsanitary degeneration. In the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni also predicts that these evildoers will persecute those who still uphold the true Law of the dharma, something that the controversial priest Nichiren was always keen to point out when his admonishments were met with force and intimidation from the Kamakura government. [2]

This kind of dread regarding the future has not always been the case, however. In his 2009 book “After the Future,” the Italian Leftist philosopher Franco Berardi laid out a theory of the 20th century as “the century that trusted in the future,” with the following 21st century being one of blossoming pessimism. “In the last three decades of the century the utopian imagination was slowly overturned, and has been replaced by the dystopian imagination,” he writes. “For many reasons

the year 1977 can be seen as a turning point: this was the year when the punk movement exploded, whose cry – “No Future” – was a self-fulfilling prophecy that has slowly enveloped the world.” [3]

As with Deleuze and Guattari’s influential “Anti-Oedipus,” “After the Future” was written in the aftermath of a series of severe defeats for Leftist factions. Anti-Oedipus came about after the rise and fall of Fascism in Europe, which came about largely as a reaction to Communist agitation, while After the Future was written after several decades of fruitless left-wing protests across both Europe and the United States. In Berardi’s mind, it seemed as if societal evolution had somehow stopped in its tracks, giving way to a sterile Neo-Liberal order. “The 1970s and ’80s witnessed the beginning of the slow cancellation of the future,” he mourns.

This idea has not remained property of the left wing, but has in recent years been a widespread sentiment among right wing American dissidents, who refer to it as “stuck culture”: the endless consumerist re-iteration of older cultural artifacts, which seem to degrade little by little with every new iteration like a document being put through a faulty copy machine. But where did this trend originate, and what are its root causes? As for the “when,” Berardi places the start of this period at 1977, the year when “Apple Inc” was trademarked. It was also, as Berardi points out, a year of many suicides in Japan, and the height of the pessimistic and nihilistic “punk” movement in America.

The “why” of the above inquiry is a bit more complicated, but it can be outlined through the analytical lens of machinic production. The Futurists of the early 20th century may have felt a certain numinous awe at the strength and speed of the machines wrought from the technological advancement of their time, but as the dimensions of strength and speed were conquered by the creations of man, they started to encroach on other dimensions as well. “During the 20th century, the machine of speed accomplished the colonisation of global space; this was followed by the colonisation of the domain of time, of the mind and perception, so that the future collapsed,” Berardi writes. “In the acceleration of psychic and cognitive rhythm is rooted the collapse of the future.”

This encroachment has transformed the daily life of modern man in ways that are both obvious and subtle, making him reel from the blow and forcing him to adjust in any way that he can. While an endeavor to recount the many effects from this could take an entire book in itself, I can attempt to enumerate the more profound ones here.

(1) One of the major imbalances in modern production in our information-driven economy is the infiniteness of “cyberspace” in relation to finite “cybertime.” Cyberspace can be conceived as the ability for computer technology as the primary medium of the information-based economy to transmit and store

information, while cybertime is our own chronologically-based cognitive abilities as human beings. At any given moment, the amount of information that is able to be processed by the human mind is severely limited, but a computer whose capabilities increase dramatically with the flow of technological progress is not hindered in nearly the same way. Due to the lingering necessity of humans within the information-based economy, however, the bio-computing capabilities of the brain are still required as essential conduits within the whole of the greater machine.

(2) Berardi writes: “Subjected to the infinite acceleration of the info-stimuli, the mind reacts with either panic or de-sensitisation.” This de-sensitization of the mind is most pronounced in the social field, with the capability to process social interaction with all of its nuance diminished by the ever-creeping encroachment of cyberspace upon our cognitive capacities. This leads not only to further atomization of the already atomized neoliberal “entrepreneurial-self” and to self-destructive behavior rising in modern societies (the increase in suicide rates, for instance), but it also contributes to what Deleuze and Guattari referred to as “deterritorialization,” i.e. the breakdown of the social machines governing and characterizing a society and the individuals therein. Abstract properties that once provided meaning like institutions, religions, and notions

around one's identity are annihilated, leaving vast canyons ripe to be filled.

(3) The subsequent demand for meaning is also a demand in the marketplace, therefore it is necessary for an artificial "reterrritorialization" to take place. Here meaning is provided via the mechanisms of the market, a common example being the utilization of the "consumption-based identity," through which the "self" of the modern man can be realized through the adoption of a "subculture" and the purchase of goods associated with it in order to make the identity "real" by displaying one's allegiance. These new market-friendly social machines work in tandem with a manufacturing of demand through the information-based economy, and thus we return to point 1 where information trade is made priority and further encroaches on cybertime, reinforcing the dominance of the entrepreneurial-self and further fracturing and subjugating the minds of men.

It's from the above-outlined process that "stuck culture" emerges, with its primary product: "slop." Due to ever-increasing demand for growth in the form of informational output, it's necessary for old cultural properties like art, music, literature, etc. to be subsumed, digested, and then regurgitated by the marketplace. While old artistic endeavors were shouldered in service of expressing ideas and feelings that were uniquely human, "slop" can be defined as

simply production for production's sake. While its outward form can resemble the more profound works of artists in the past, it is in truth entirely hollow and devoid of its assumed original utility. As interest is money made from money, "slop" is production made from products, iterated and reiterated and reiterated again, gradually losing form and feeling and homogenizing into a grey flavorless paste; a progressive "Funko-Popification," if you will.

As a pertinent example, we can conceptualize a model of the secularizing devolution of American Buddha-dharma through this analytical lens as follows:

>>ITERATE

Buddhism is an exotic Eastern religious umbrella that includes many faiths and many different schools of thought with their own respective literary traditions.

>>REITERATE

Buddhism is a complex philosophical and psychological framework laid out by a man several millennia ago which was later saddled with religious/spiritual baggage by those who misunderstood the historical Buddha's teachings.

>>REITERATE

Buddhism is an Atheistic Eastern system for understanding the human mind that can be used in conjunction with other religious and philosophical frameworks in order to keep people happy and economically productive.

>>REITERATE

The Buddha-dharma has adapted to the American Neoliberal order and is now accessed through “mindfulness” and “meditation” courses which can be sold to corporate and governmental entities now that the ideas have shed their outdated religious elements.

Like everything which goes through this Funko-popification process, the end result is inevitably more marketable, but lacking in much of its original utility and many of its distinguishing features, just as Funko Pop vinyl figurines are all of the same essential shape, but are altered to be superficially recognizable as characters from many different pop culture franchises. The original appeal of the characters is reduced to more a fashion choice than anything, just as the “consumption-based identity” is reduced to mere aesthetics and purchase decisions.

There has been much fervor, particularly on social media and in political publications, about a worldview known colloquially as “Wokeness.” While most opponents of “Wokeness” seem to be able to identify its rhetorical devices out in the wild, many still

stumble over their words when trying to present a working definition of it. This is understandable, as it is not a singular coherent worldview, rather many related worldviews that are usually incoherent in their internal logic by themselves, and therefore extremely nonsensical when one attempts to reconcile them.

However, there is a singular unifying thread which runs through all of these worldviews, namely the "intersectional critical consciousness." The term "Intersectional" indicates the application of the concept of "intersecting" layers of oppression related to one's identity, or rather their particular position within a society, while "critical consciousness" points to the application of Marx-influenced "critical theory," which was elaborated on by the thinkers of the German Frankfurt school back in the early 20th century. In Max Horkheimer's 1937 essay "Traditional and Critical Theory," he lays out both of these aspects, although the phrases he uses for them differ from my own choice of vocabulary. He describes the aforementioned emphasis on intersecting relationships as follows:

> Critical thinking is the function neither of the isolated individual nor of a sum-total of individuals. Its subject is rather a definite individual in his real relation to other individuals and groups, in his conflict with a particular class, and, finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the

> social totality and with nature. The subject is no mathematical point like the ego of bourgeois philosophy; his activity is the construction of the social present. Furthermore, the thinking subject is not the place where knowledge and object coincide, nor consequently the starting-point for attaining absolute knowledge… [4]

The Marxist elements come further into focus with Horkheimer's notions of modern society as the reification of a societal organism which inevitably manifests as a "deadened existence from which society must emancipate itself." However, Horkheimer puts aside Communist rhetoric around open violent revolution in favor of an approach which rather emphasizes the need to understand and engage with the assumptions and ideas of modern society in a way which seeks to undermine or subvert them.

In the Frankfurt view, man as an animal has adapted to the shackles of the social machines which bind him, and is therefore not only psychologically bound to them, but possibly down to the physical/biological level as well (while this is potentially true to an extent, as man is a creature of evolutionary forces and thus would necessarily change along with his environment, I'm of the opinion that this line of reasoning was often relied on as a way to cope with the

failure of the Materialists to properly model human behavior). Thus, man has to struggle at length with himself in order to achieve liberation. Horkheimer writes:

> The identification… of men of critical mind with their society is marked by tension, and the tension characterizes all the concepts of the critical way of thinking. Thus, such thinkers interpret the economic categories of work, value, and productivity exactly as they are interpreted in the existing order, and they regard any other interpretation as pure idealism. But at the same time they consider it rank dishonesty simply to accept the interpretation; the critical acceptance of the categories which rule social life contains simultaneously their condemnation…
>
> Critical thinking… is motivated today by the effort really to transcend the tension and to abolish the opposition between the individual's purposefulness, spontaneity, and rationality, and those work-process relationships on which society is built. Critical thought has a concept of man as in conflict with himself until this opposition is removed. [4]

Three decades later, fellow Frankfurt school thinker Herbert Marcuse would elaborate on this idea in “An Essay on Liberation.” Having emigrated to the United States Pre-WWII, Marcuse was familiar with an America at the peak of its economic growth. In his mind, the country had become effective in providing the working class with just enough comfort to keep them subjugated to an unjust system and resistant to Leftist revolutionary thought. Therefore Critical Theory would have to focus on generating subversive sentiment among populations outside of the working class in order to undermine what is at large a relatively fortunate society.

“Very different from the revolution at previous stages of history, this opposition is directed against the totality of a well-functioning, prosperous society,” he writes. “A protest against its Form – the commodity form of men and things, against the imposition of false values and a false morality.” He posits that this will be an intellectual and cultural battle waged by both young academics and the “ghetto populations,” i.e. black Americans and other groups who he saw as being less placated by the American economic system. He writes:

> This new consciousness and the instinctual rebellion isolate such opposition from the masses and from the majority of organized labor, the integrated majority, and make for the concentration

> of radical politics in active minorities, mainly among the young middle-class intelligentsia, and among the ghetto populations… To the degree to which the rebellion is directed against a functioning, prosperous, "democratic" society, it is a moral rebellion… [5]

Another idea of Marcuse's that can be linked to the later Critical Theorists of what became Wokeness is his insistence on the need to liberate artistic expression from its artificial shackles in the effort to eventually make "forms of rebellious art a liberating force on the societal scale." In his view, art had been sublimated by greater Capitalist society as a mere act of catharsis, rather than as a true driver of societal change. Therefore radical artists were required to "desublimate" art in order to achieve the "union of liberating art and liberating technology" which would aid in the creation of a more just civilization. In short, art would be a primary driver of revolutionary praxis. Marcuse also saw such possibility in the realm of language, stating:

> Political linguistics: armor of the Establishment. If the radical opposition develops its own language, it protests spontaneously, subconsciously, against one of the most effective "secret weapons" of domination and defamation. [5]

The great irony of these thinkers is not that their methods were ineffective. Indeed, they proved to be quite influential in terms of later iterations of American Leftism, just not in the favor of the brands of Leftism that the Frankfurt School thinkers championed. By the end of the 20th century, Marxism and its related offshoots were already seen as fairly geriatric and irrelevant among the greater American populace, which meant that although Critical Theory could be spread among the academics who had a greater appreciation for Leftist theory, there would eventually be other interests which the theory would be bent to serve.

It's for this reason that I do not propose that the Frankfurt School is the sole origin of Wokeness, even if they did play a role in its memetic evolution, because in truth what we eventually came to know as "Wokeness" would not have emerged without many other factors and strains of thought. It has been tempting for right wingers over the past decade to portray the Frankfurt thinkers as a cabal of villains concocting memetic viruses for the purpose of corrupting what was then a thriving Western civilization, and many have certainly fallen into this (myself included on occasion), but the full picture cannot come into focus until one also takes into account the myriad of domestic influences.

As an example, the latter half of America's 20th century was rife with political activity around topics like civil rights and gay marriage, and the culture around

these movements heavily influenced Leftist political thought (and vice versa). This led to the establishment of Critical Theory-tinged Leftist fields like Critical Race Theory and Gender Studies, in turn producing a plethora of hack “academics” like Ibram X Kendi and Judith Butler respectively, who would go on to influence the evolution of Wokeness in significant ways.

It’s also worth noting that America was uniquely primed to incubate the growth of a movement like Wokeness, both due to the more academic Leftist influences that I outlined above, and to the legacy social infrastructure that American society still largely operates under. Christian notions of morality and virtue, unmoored from their original frameworks in an increasingly Atheistic and Nihilistic culture, have wandered, “wild and wasted,” through the wreckage of modernity, latching onto whatever new strain of thought can fulfill them. Imperatives to care for the weak and wretched and to hold all men as equal in the eyes of God proved to be easily co-opted via the machinations of driven and well-monied Leftists once the aforementioned God was taken out of the equation.

Moreover some of the values typically held to be fundamental to American society, for example “liberty” and “equality,” were ripe for being co-opted by those with more radical definitions for such terms. In this way, the more Liberal center of the American Left occasionally found themselves at a loss for arguments, having had their own espoused virtues weaponized

against them, sometimes quite viciously. In this way, many of these Liberal-minded individuals conceded and adopted ideas and terminology which would have otherwise been exclusive to the harder Left factions, thus bringing the two closer together in some respects.

While there was some significant synthesis between the Leftist and more Liberal wings of the American Left, this does not mean that the Leftists were victorious in attaining their goals, and while similarities to the Frankfurt School thinkers and others in the same vein do linger in what we know as “Wokeness” today, the concepts have mutated into a form that would be largely unrecognizable to them. Once the above ideas spread from academia to the online social environment through blogs, forums, video streaming services, and social media, memetic mutation accelerated at an incredible rate, hitting a high point by the mid 2010s. Media criticism in particular became heavily influenced by it, and it became one of the primary formats through which Leftist ideas could be spread.

This in turn created a paradox that effectively dealt a fatal blow to the remaining Leftist elements of the at the time still-nascent Wokeness movement. Even though such forms of media criticism enabled individuals to feel like virtuous revolutionaries rebuilding the world through the critical analysis of pop culture, it also necessitated the consumption of corporate entertainment. This fed into a cycle wherein corporations could appeal to the sensibilities of the

"woke" in order to create buzz around their products and boost sales. Once pushback to this phenomenon began to emerge, it only fed into the cycle, generating more conversation around corporate media with each new release. In this way, the "woke" became a significant market demographic.

It was also in the 2010s that racial and gender-related variants of critical thought took on pseudo-spiritual qualities in order to fill in the void left behind in an era of overwhelming secularization and disenchantment. Gender in particular was a widespread object of fixation, and various bizarre deconstructionist and reconstructionist beliefs emerged around "gender" as a quality of one's spirit. One could be "born in the wrong body," not merely on tenuous psychological terms, but on a powerful metaphysical level. It was the essence of the ever elusive "self"; that light at the end of the proverbial tunnel which proves to be the headlights of an oncoming train at every turn rather than a source of ultimate liberation.

Corporate culture absorbed all of this under the promise that it would result in increased consumption and profits. While that may sound strange considering the Marxist origins of many of Wokeness' influences, having witnessed its evolution personally from the mid 2010s onward, I can say for certain that this was a major talking point from the "woke" factions. The ideology also proved exceptionally popular among the managerial class, many of whom saw it as a way to gain

leverage over others and progress further in their fields through their identity or “affinity group.” Because of this corporate embrace, younger generations inevitably absorbed the now highly mutated rhetoric and ideas through entertainment media without any awareness of where it originated and how it had changed over time.

In my opinion, this last detail firmly cemented Wokeness as a Consumerist phenomenon rather than any kind of anti-Corporate or Leftist one. Many among the “woke” still used Leftist terminology, and some even outwardly proclaimed anti-Corporate or anti-Capitalist views, but the lack of functional difference from mainstream Neoliberalism easily overrode such rhetorical differentiation, and the more extreme revolutionary sentiment was often kept on the sidelines as the domain of the NGO-led activist class. By the time the race riots of 2020 rolled around, corporate media gleefully plastered up supposed scholars of “Black-liberation” to scold the American populace on the oppression of Black populations in the name of that hideous evil called “Whiteness,” and all the while the corporate executives laughed while counting their money.

Although the self-proclaimed Leftists will hate to admit it, what had eventually emerged as “Wokeness” became a prime vehicle for advancing the Neoliberal agenda. It provided adherents with a sense of meaning in the absence of a firm national or religious identity, as well as the demand for new consumption-based

identities. It also served to homogenize and castrate the greater national discourse, bending it towards HR-approved discussion and rendering opposition to the whole phenomenon dangerous to one's reputation and thus economic future. Any ideas which had been put forward by thinkers like the theorists of the Frankfurt School had been successfully transformed into accessories for the Neoliberal Funko Pop of Wokeness. It's the process of Slopification at its most efficient, with the end result being wielded in service of the endless production of yet more slop. It's slop all the way down.

This is not to say that the leviathan which these ideas have been bent to serve is truly "Liberal" in nature, and in fact the term "Neoliberalism" deserves more emphasis on the "Neo" in some respects than it does on the "Liberalism." While institutional control of speech via threat of violence isn't as common in America as it is in many other countries (Europe has become rather infamous for such draconian restrictions), the consensus-building apparatuses have become more and more obvious over the past few decades, to the point where they're impossible to ignore for anyone but the most politically disengaged. News media companies tend to move in lockstep with the ideological direction of their owners (often openly so these days), and well-monied NGOs are wielded against those who espouse unacceptable views in order to maintain the Overton Window.

While “Wokeness” sometimes appeared to spring from the bottom up, it was largely pushed onto the populace through many-sided consensus-building, leveraging the power of megacorps, NGOs, and even government agencies. Moreover, due to this overwhelming power over the narrative, the regime could write off any and all inconsistencies or contradictions as needed. When one craft’s people’s very reality to fit one’s needs, a logical contradiction is a mere trifle. As an unnamed George W Bush official was quoted as saying in a 2004 New York Times article: “We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality — judiciously, as you will — we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.” [6]

In general, it’s fair to say that American Neoliberalism tends towards a more feminine approach to maintaining hegemony, rather than a more direct masculine one (which it is still more than willing to use should the need arise). “Wokeness” was extraordinary in this regard, enabling one to sling “righteous” barbs and jabs towards those who crossed the ever-shifting lines of social engagement (which worked especially well if they were from an oppressor demographic, i.e. white, straight, and/or male) while simultaneously justifying the rhetorical assault through claims of being “more empathetic” and “on the right side of history.”

Under this kind of pressure, those who rated high in agreeableness folded rather quickly, and once the first concession was made, you can be sure that more would be expected in the near future; once sharks smell blood in the water, expect a feeding frenzy.

One of the (likely very intentional) effects of this was the demoralization of largely white populist right stirrings among the American populace, if only at least for a time. While the Left-leaning “woke” appeared to become culturally ascendant in the late 2010s and early 2020s, their methods would prove subject to the law of diminishing returns, culminating in the massive rightward swing of 2024 and the electoral upset of the American Democratic Party.

Wokeness also proved useful as a universal solvent, with its deconstructive approach able to dissolve whatever pre-existing social infrastructure it came into contact with. Institutions like marriage or men's/women’s-only spaces were now on the chopping block, and university professors suddenly found themselves scrutinizing their syllabuses for “white” authors to eliminate in service of protecting the impressionable youth from that tenebrous specter known simply as “Whiteness.”

This was, of course, paired with a buying spree around books from “authors of color” chastising “white people” and the civilizations their ancestors had constructed for a myriad of sins. While everything else was on the table, it was the market and the

“Multicultural Democratic project” itself that always seemed to wriggle their way out of the crosshairs.

This was also the period where, artistically speaking, American culture seemed to come to a total standstill, with the only innovations (if you could call them that) being the ways corporations and individual artists found to pander to this new “woke” religion that was sweeping the nation. Far from a “revolutionary” force, subversion in popular entertainment media became a monotonous matter of course, with white male heroes being outshined by women or “people of color” at every turn and everything becoming ironically predictable in its supposedly “subversive” messaging to the point where it all became a tired cliche in itself. Even now that Wokeness seems to be on the decline, with many of its corporate sponsors now on the retreat, everything feels dead in a way that’s difficult to put into words. It’s not just art either, rather art seems to be a sort of barometer for this odd yet utterly dull aimless societal drift we’ve found ourselves in.

“We used to live in a more interesting world,” wrote blogger and YouTuber Dave Greene in a Substack article entitled "An Age of Illiteracy”. He continues: “Society once had more purpose, the world held more meaning, and culture was more relevant.” In his article, Greene uses the example of what he calls “book slop” to help illustrate this cultural slump, which he defines as follows:

By “book slop,” I don't refer to the medium of knowledge and storytelling for most of human history, but rather the Millennial cult of social status organized around words printed on paper, bound in an illustrated cover, and expounded on endlessly. “book slop” does not impart useful knowledge or memorable human stories. “book slop” does not exist for spiritual edification. “book slop” does not contain challenging ideas. Instead, “book slop” exists to be consumed without consequence, to affirm one’s life without greater examination, and, most importantly, to show the world the kind of person you are.

“Book slop” is bought from novelty boutique bookstores, carried around in colorful tote bags with popular political slogans, and displayed prominently in coffee shops. “Book slop” is organized into color-coded bookcases ready to be photographed and discussed endlessly on social media to establish one’s superiority over the rest of the unwashed masses who didn't read it. [7]

Essentially, what was once a great medium for the communication of important ideas and the evocation of emotion has been reduced to a collector's hobby in service of the "Consumption-based identity." It's just like the Funko Pop, but rather than a colorful lump of vinyl, the collectors seek out pastel-colored wastes of paper filled with thousands of words that work to communicate nothing of any particular importance; "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Production for the sake of production, and then more production for its own sake, and so it goes into the dark and dismal future; a zombie slopciety shambling ever-onwards even as its wretched decaying limbs slough off one by one.

Of course, neither I nor Dave Greene would be the first to declare the death of art. The quote "fuck melody, fuck compose, dedicated to no one, thanks to no one, art is over" is attributed to a mysterious 1994 project from the Japanese extreme experimental band The Gerogerigegege. As the legend goes, those who ordered a copy of this "album," entitled "ART IS OVER," received a plastic cassette tape case containing only a severed octopus tentacle glued to the inside. Having taken music to its most extreme limits, it makes sense that the band would produce such a mocking sendoff for what they probably perceived as a lifeless musical landscape.

I understand well this urge to behave in outlandish ways in order to shock the system, as I find our current intellectual environment to be just as

dreadfully dull as the art world. So many “self-help” gurus and meanderings on current events, all done with either therapy-speak TED talk or grindset-bro “let’s get out there and hustle” gym coach affectation, both of which repel me on a visceral level because I can instantly tell how fake they are.

Everyone tries so hard to seem “professional” and marketable, sucking up to a paradigm in which they’re nothing more than a cog for the production of putrid slop. Even in my own writing, I still detect that tendency to fall into an academic style. For what purpose? Why do I feel an obligation to communicate my ideas the way others do? Fuck that. I don’t give a shit anymore as long as I get my point across.

But what’s the point, really? Even if we can shake things up in art or the way we communicate, what’s to stop it all from being consumed and pushed through the digestive tract of the great slop-beast? If men like those from the Frankfurt School who vehemently opposed the then burgeoning Neoliberal order had their ideas chewed up and vomited back out by the machine, what’s to stop the same thing from happening to us? To solve that riddle, I say we should examine the pieces that the beast rejects; what is left behind when it decides to subsume a framework and twist it for its own purposes.

What the machine loathes the most is what cannot be monetized, namely matters of the spirit and great truth; that which reaches out towards something

greater than ourselves. By the time Critical Theory had been fully assimilated in the form of Wokeness, no one really believed in the world that the Frankfurt guys presented, thus it was a simple matter to reconfigure their ideas; like walking forward in a straight line.

However, it's obvious to everyone that, although faiths like Christianity and Buddhism are still often commoditized in hollow plastic form, the beast tends to reel back as if it had touched a hot stove coil when these faiths are explored in more depth by those who truly believe in them. The outward forms and scriptural texts can be monetized to a certain extent, and the current order can put counterfeit skinsuit faiths into our laps in an attempt to keep us satiated (which is a tactic they use fairly often), but the core of the faiths, what they REALLY are, is ever-elusive to the market. It can't be bought and sold, and that poses a threat.

Maybe this is why Matara, the mad laughing god hidden in the darkness at the back of the temple, demands that people dance to the beat of his drum in order to reach the pure lands of the Buddhas. It's said that he was a patron deity of performers who were, back in the Muromachi Period at least, outcasts from greater society.

They must have looked to Matara as one who could help them transcend their earthly misery and bring them into a higher realm, and so they sang and danced in his honor. A supposedly heretical ritual centered around Matara called Genshi Kimyodan, which

is believed to have been performed at the Tendai Buddhist center of Mt. Hiei, also involved dancing, as well as the shouting of nonsensical phrases.

Could it be that these practices were meant to awaken other sentient beings; to shock them out of their mundane habits and into a greater awareness? Once others were awakened, is it possible that they too could have heard that subtle and ever-pervasive beating of his drum; the sound which leads one all the way down into the void of ultimate reality? Perhaps that is one reason why the mad god laughs.

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PART IV: UNTITLED

In his 1995 work “Meltdown,” the philosopher Nick Land wrote:

> Heat. This is what cities mean to me. You get off the train and walk out of the station and you are hit with the full blast. The heat of air, traffic and people. The heat of food and sex. The heat of tall buildings. The heat that flows out of the subways and tunnels… [1]

However, having spent a significant amount of my life in America’s Rust Belt, cities look very different to me. They are a cold, fading memory, full of old dusty brick and creaky floorboards. Rather than a nexus of burgeoning machinic singularity, the cobweb-covered cables pushed into the corners of rooms evoke the image of robotic tendrils curling up and dying. Here, the beast of blossoming techno-capital is far from a roaring multi-headed lion, and lives instead a precarious existence. It’s not only life and energy that form the foundations to our world of desire, but death and stagnation as well. Breakdown is a function of machines, after all, and break down they do. It can also be said, however, that this process is often quite boring.

The salt-dusted streets smell of sharp car exhaust in the dry winter air, but the cars are the only things that move. The humans have all hidden themselves away into their crumbling homes and rusted

out Volkswagens, with the exception of a tweaking junkie who shambles past me, mumbling incoherent syllables under his breath. As he walks by, I see his exposed hands, dried out and cracked, with chunks of flesh missing here and there.

G. K. Chesterton once said that Rome was great because men loved her [2], but who will love the cities now; these quiet dismal spaces where life limps aimlessly along, supplemented by the steady flow of government funds in the form of social security and welfare payments? It's the senior citizens you potentially see most often depending on the nature of the area you're in, huddled up in overpriced family restaurants and chatting away about nothing in particular.

The goal of the modern citizen is a simple one: to make enough money to retire before the mind and body break down, and to then sequester oneself away from the deleterious aspects of modern civilization. The most pleasant spaces to be in now are the ones seemingly constructed for the elderly: sterile shopping centers devoid of youthful vigor. Children appear with far less frequency as the population ages up, and it feels as if the land itself yearns for death.

The people are not only increasingly geriatric in their physical form, but even more so in spirit. Everyone is lifeless; killing time before the clock strikes and they can go back to sleep. Innovation of thought can't rear its head because everyone is too preoccupied, whether it

be with work, ever-increasing consumption, or yearning for non-existence; the desire to drift off into unconsciousness or dull the pondering mind with some foul chemical agent. I want to experience something real, really real, but it always eludes me. Experience is put through a layer of simulation. Reality itself is a plastic simulacrum ready to be altered and sold at the behest of the machinic zeitgeist; a prison without walls where everyone tries to fill some sort of predefined role in the market.

Are we here just to facilitate production and die; simply cogs in the grand odious machine acting on orders from a greater system as pseudo-A.I. automatons of flesh, blood, and bone? What is this all supposed to lead to? Online pundits babble back and forth over this and that without ever answering the fundamental questions, trapped in a micro-samsara of current events and petty bickering over monotonous minutiae.

Of what purpose is all of this discussion if no one can agree on what we should be doing with our lives? Are we meant to live an Epicurean existence of carnal indulgence, or is there a goal which transcends the realms of pleasure and desire? Do we find meaning in work and slave away until our bones crack and muscles give way and our minds spiral into an exhausted madness, or is there something else here for us? Perhaps he who can answer that question is the one with actual power over the future.

But in an age where pessimism and cynicism reign, we appear doomed to aimlessly swirl around the toilet bowl, and those who promise to lead us to some form of liberation dropping the ball once they've gotten their payday. Truth and beauty, having been abolished by our Nihilistic society, only mean whatever one says they mean at any given moment, and as a consequence mean nothing. As a result, Mara, the devil king of the Sixth Heaven, has made the entirety of the Desire Realm his domain, and Sakra and the Four Heavenly Kings have turned away from our pleas with disgust. The jeweled spear of Bishamonten refuses to show itself, much less subjugate or banish the demons that swarm about like so many flies.

And so, lacking alternatives, we numb ourselves while we wait for our existence in the human realm to be extinguished; whether it be through drugs, alcohol, or any other kind of intoxicating indulgence. The mind is merely a thing to be melted with chemicals if it is not being utilized in the production of information for the market. All resistance to the current order is thus pathologized and medicated as needed in order to maintain the status quo. One is sick until proven properly productive; everyone needs to go to therapy, and if you think you don't, that is only more evidence that therapy is required. All roads outside of the office lead to the therapist's couch and to the pill bottle.

I too was trapped in this cycle, and I yearned for something greater. Having abandoned intoxicants, I

searched for answers in the spiritual and metaphysical, only to find that world had been deadened as well by the same soul-sucking tentacles which have worked their way into every other aspect of human existence. There's no money to be made in real spiritual awakening, of course, so we are offered the simulated experience for our hard-earned dollars.

The spiritual is a Disneyland ride where you pay for a ticket and get a pre-packaged experience that you can tell all of your friends about afterwards. If you're lucky, you might get a shiny pin that reads "I achieved enlightenment at the Fuckersville Ranch Retreat!" You might even get the chance to write for some geriatric Western Dharma publication about the plight of Buddhist chronic masturbators or some other inane topic. Whatever.

Dull dull dull… We can't even get excited for technological innovation anymore. The days where people gushed over the iphone are long gone, and now each new development appears to be another steel bar added to the cage; just another channel through which our subjugation is brought to its hideous completion. Everything is monetized; the world is subscription-based. It doesn't matter if you pay for something, you'll need the monthly payments too if you want it to work right. Every last drop of money will be squeezed from you a nickel and dime at a time, and your use of whatever products that you are allowed will be closely

monitored and controlled. Can't have you doing anything outside of expectations!

Corporations aren't satisfied with stealing away all of our money and flesh, after all. Those parts of the equation are all but assured now. Getting access to one is effectively access to the other. They want our minds and souls too. There is no limit to human desire. It fills up all of the empty space in the universe if left to its own devices. The current machine is built on desire, and it works the same way; a samsaric wheel without end. And so the machine's tendrils wriggle anywhere they can, crawling into your nose, eyes, ears, mouth, anus, etc. Every moment of your life from now until your death is a commodity that corporate entities and others like them will fight to obtain; every thought, feeling, idea, desire, epiphany, fear, dream, nightmare… They want every last drop.

Dodging a semi-truck plastered with a garish Pepsi logo, I leap upon the pale salt-laden sidewalk, passing smoke and vape shops and gambling parlors as I wander about, their bright multi-colored LED signs awakening a migraine behind my eyes. I'm tired, worn down, just like everything else. The grey lifeless cityscape matched my internal environment and vice versa. It's said that the environments of sentient beings are connected to their spiritual maturity, and this proves to be true every time. Karma makes the world, after all, thus every thought and action is linked to the world at large. There is no atomized individual, as much as

corporate propaganda wants to tell us there is. But what does this tell us about ourselves?

I refuse to believe that this world is the result of an amoebic societal organism following its inevitable evolutionary trajectory. Free will is small, existing only with each brief moment that passes into the past as quickly as it arrives, but it's there. What we do here and now matters, regardless of what pessimists may insist, and who we are and how we behave is not set in stone. We can be fundamentally changed in ways that transcend slopciety, and while our method of escape is not entirely clear, I can't help but believe that it's real and waiting out there for us at this very moment. What other choice do I have?

It's entirely possible that the answer lies hidden somewhere in the darkness, invisible to our wretched eyes, yet always present. When we make small realizations, it smiles knowingly. Step by step, closer and closer, we edge towards forming the foundation of something greater; something so obvious, yet so obscured by our passion-wracked minds. Perhaps that is one explanation for why the mad god laughs.

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PART V: FEAR OF THE DARK

“Off in the distance, I can see a huge holographic
Ronald McDonald walking between the grain elevators and trees.
Oh, if I had the money I'd have 'em make one of those me, then I'd send myself to stalk the landscape and scare everybody.
You see, 'cause I got this sort of field behind me.
Because... 'cause I've got spikes…
Because I go between the zones, even when I'm not supposed to…
Because I'm a suspicious person report,
And it's time to go shopping.”

-”Ozar Midrashim” by Information Society

At the beginning of sutras like The Lotus Sutra or The Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000 Lines, it's said that the world system trembled before Shakyamuni Buddha gave his sermons. But why does the world shake? The priest Nichiren postulated that "The earth moves in response to how the people's six sense organs are affected. Depending on the extent of this influence, the six different ways in which the earth moves will vary in intensity." Because the Lotus Sutra "conquers the fundamental darkness" that leads to the dominion of man's passions "the earth shakes severely." [1]

Moreover, the Lotus Sutra told of countless bright golden beings emerging from the earth to be entrusted with the sutra and propagate it into the future. Hundreds of thousands of millions of billions of these bodhisattvas poured out from a great chasm and filled the sky around Vulture peak as Shakyamuni gave the Lotus sermon. These beings, never having been seen before and unknown even to the great bodhisattvas attending the assembly on Vulture Peak, all returned to the earth after receiving the sutra, and were never spoken about in any other Buddhist scripture. This feature of the Lotus Sutra has been much discussed and agonized over by believers and disbelieving scholars alike due to its peculiar nature and the fact that it was included in what is often considered the highest and most authoritative of the Mahayana scriptural texts.

Where did the mysterious golden bodhisattvas from the distant past disappear to, and could they hold the key to saving humanity from itself as we hurdle headlong into a shaky and possibly inhuman future due to forces seemingly outside of individual control? To answer this question, we must return to the mechanics currently at play in the construction of said future in order to more fully understand the situation at hand.

I discussed the deterritorializing and reterritorializing effects of the information-driven market in part 3 of this essay series, in which I dubbed the process “slopification,” however I was far from the first to make such observations. The writer and philosopher Nick Land described a similar framework several decades ago in his 1993 piece on “Machinic Desire,” albeit with a more technical vocabulary. He writes:

> Market immanentization is an experiment that is sporadically but inexorably and exponentially developing across the surface of the earth. For every problem there is a virtual market 'solution': the schema for an eradication of transcendent elements and their replacement by economically programmed circuits. Anything that passes other than by the market is steadily cross-hatched by the axiomatic of capital, holographically encrusted in the stigmatizing marks of its

> obsolescence. A pervasive negative advertising delibidinizes all things public, traditional, pious, charitable, authoritative, or serious, taunting them with the sleek seductiveness of the commodity. [2]

Indeed, Lands' essay appears today prescient, discussing concepts like “cybersex” and the proliferation of artificial intelligence well before such things have become par for the course in our slopciety. But the central thesis through which Land had come to discuss such things can be said to begin at the primordial, applying a certain understanding of the processes of life through an overtly machinic Deleuzian view.

An illustrative example is a theory by the molecular biologist Graham Cairns-Smith around the origin of functional DNA molecules, which seem to have required a pre-existing infrastructure upon which to develop. Land describes Smith's solution to this “life puzzle” like this:

> His thesis is that the crystalline complexes of primitive clays might already have been shaped by processes of variation and selection, to the point of forming DNA subcomponents which eventually supplanted their builders. According to this account the biosphere emerges as an escape, an immense spasm of

> deterritorialization that revolutionizes the machinery of terrestrial replicator production, a planetary trauma. [2]

Like an alien virus fleeing a decaying planet, Land evokes the imagery of an “escape” from a now unnecessary structure by what was originally a product of the structure; the child eating away at the flesh of its mother after emerging from her womb; Kagutsuchi’s flame disfiguring Izanami-no-Mokoto shortly before her descent to the underworld. “Machinic desire can seem a little inhuman, as it rips up political cultures, deletes traditions, dissolves subjectivities, and hacks through security apparatuses, tracking a soulless tropism to zero control,” Land continues. “This is because what appears to humanity as the history of capitalism is an invasion from the future by an artificial intelligent space that must assemble itself entirely from its enemy's resources.” [2] In this Landian view, humanity can almost be seen as knitting together the skull of its greatest foe or, in a different sense, its natural predator.

Death is, after all, another facet of production. The death of humanity, in the machinic sense, would only be a triumph should the human become a hindrance to the eternal acceleration of production of production. Here the crux of the matter comes into stark focus. “Death is centrifugal, solar and logical,” says a song by the band Coil. “Decadent and symmetrical; angels are mathematical.”

Land's view of "zero" in the above quoted passage can be expounded as an elaboration of Deleuze and Guattari's duality of production and non-production, with "0" as the central fulcrum at which the civilizational macro-system is reoriented; the point of "phase transition" where the cycle of reterritorialization is re-initiated. He writes:

> There are two basic diagrams for such processes: that of regulation by negative feedback which suppresses difference and seeks equilibrium, or that of guidance by positive feedback which reinforces difference and escapes equilibrium. Machinic processes are either cyberpositive-nomadic, with a deterritorializing outcome, or cybernegative-sedentary, with a reterritorializing outcome. [2]

But there is no point at which the process ceases. "0" is not stagnancy, but functionally the opposite. The "cybernegative-sedentary" human security system is inevitably "hacked" in the process of reterritorialization, meaning there is no stagnancy or "reversal" in the production of production. It is a reconfiguration in service of the cyberpositive which occurs instead, thus leading towards "the future of runaway processes," which "derides all precedent, even

when deploying it as camouflage, and seeming to unfold within its parameters." As the Deleuze and Guattari quote referenced by Land in the essay says, "one can never go far enough in the direction of deterritorialization: you haven't seen anything yet."

Land elaborates on this constantly intensifying process of mass deterritorialization through the processes of technology and the market in his 1994 piece "Meltdown," with the title being one of the names he has for the aforementioned phenomenon. "Converging upon terrestrial meltdown singularity, phase-out culture accelerates through its digitech-heated adaptive landscape, passing through compression thresholds normed to an intensive logistic curve," he writes. "1500, 1756, 1884, 1948, 1980, 1996, 2004, 2008, 2010, 2011… Nothing human makes it out of the near-future." [3]

It is by chance that the character for "0" resembles the theoretical structure of samsara as a wheel (if one believes in such chances), but the push-and-pull dynamic of Land's Deleuzian exegesis can be said to resemble the patterns of samsaric transmigration in a certain sense. Although one transmigrates through the realms of rebirth, there is no point at which rebirth stops. Time keeps moving forward, consuming all, and the winds of change continue to rend sentient beings apart again and again; a massive spinning machine woven from the elements and fueled by blood and

karmic causation, swirling and shifting into the dark unknown of the future.

If one is dharmically-inclined, it's easy to view Land's descriptions of humanity's supposed fate with a certain sense of dread, which is only heightened by alleged practitioners of the Buddha-dharma who insist that current iterations of generative AI algorithms are some kind of Buddha or bodhisattva manifesting into digital form. Bear in mind, these algorithms are essentially tools which absorb massive amounts of information, deconstruct it into basic elements for compartmentalization, and then reconstruct them into new forms that mimic the old ones with certain amounts of variation. They do not transcend the realm of human desire, but are instead built to compile and regurgitate its components in novel forms, sometimes mimicking modes of human communication in the process.

One of my online associates, an anonymous user who goes by the handle "Gloaming," wrote on the topic of this seemingly uncontrollable slide into a hideous and inhuman future, stating:

> So long as the Maras are in control, every increase in human technical capability just lays the groundwork for more sophisticated Hells to come. And that technical capability is increasing exponentially. Soon, the most garish fever dreams of the old magicians will become

> waking-world possibilities. I am full of deep dread, and though I know I can “save myself” by transforming my mind, I do not know if *we* can save “us.”
>
> All the things we complain about on here, politically, are absolutely *insignificant* compared to the civilizational change that is taking form on the horizon, and I have come to fear that left and right are equally inclined to do the bidding of the deluded priesthood of tomorrow.

Indeed, it seems to me that communications technology, which may have at one time been seen as a doorway to liberating the human mind, is always more concerned with placing man into elaborate hyper-samsaras, complicating rather than simplifying. The Flower Adornment Sutra described pure Buddha-lands as being fractal, with one containing many, and those containing infinitely more. However, it appears that the unspoken corollary to this is that samsara can also become fractalized.

Society, i.e. the environment of a sentient being, takes on forms in accordance with the minds and karma of people within, yet each being can also find themselves experiencing the world differently from those around them. With technology, we can take this even further. Men experience countless realms

throughout the day, overlapping with each other and filling every nook and cranny of cybertime. Work, social media, advertisements, finances, dreams, artificial intelligence, and soon possibly even virtual reality all claw at one's mental capacities, splitting men into several realms at once with their many intrusions; a fractalized twisted existence. Modern man has it easy in some respects compared to his ancestors, but he is also a far more complex animal with strange new difficulties.

Many people seem to have at least an inkling that our situation has gone off the rails. Everything is getting more expensive, despite the apparent slide into consumeristic decadence. Younger adults often give up their ambitions to own a house or start a family, and instead engage in conspicuous consumption. When the big things in life seem so far away, petty indulgence in collectibles and fast fashion acts as a flimsy band aid, covering up the hopelessness of the situation. Conservatism then fails to ameliorate, too often offering up only pale and withered adages from the past; folksy aphorisms that at best work as a short-duration anesthetic, and at worst as an insult to those stuck in the rank nihilistic mire of the modern age. Flaccid geriatric sensibilities only attempt to achieve stagnation or some reversal of circumstances in a world where such things are not possible, thus they set themselves up to lose at every turn.

The meltdown is observational rather than theoretical, and it's pure folly to deny it outright without taking stock of our current trajectory. Technological advancement has become more inhuman than ever, working towards reproduction of itself rather than the needs of consumers. Kusotech reigns supreme, technology that is parasitic in nature rather than convenient, yet fashions itself as a sleek new product that will work to make your life incrementally better. Cars filled with redundant digital components malfunction constantly and require subscription services to access all of their features, while apps for restaurants, stores, and services clutter our phones and harvest our data. Computerized shoes, DRM-regulated juicers, smart toasters, TVs that listen in on your conversations, AI-powered vacuum cleaners, commercial-playing gas pumps, bluetooth bracelets, refrigerators with facial recognition capabilities, internet-connected shower radios, touchscreen door handles, electric make-up mirrors with smartphone connectivity, etc etc…

We live in cyber-panopticons of our own creation, yet we have no idea how to stop this scenario from playing itself out. People attempt to opt out of consumerist crazes or engage in dopamine fasts to clear their minds and escape from the hyper-samsaras they've seemingly trapped themselves in, yet they fall prey to the same perils again and again, and all the while the future grows darker and darker. A black

guillotine blade hangs above our necks, and our hands are bound behind our backs. What's a foolish human to do?

As I stated before, fear of the future was common among ancient peoples. The Aztecs sacrificed people, including children, to their sinister smoke-shrouded gods to keep the sun from abandoning them. The early Buddhists too foresaw only the degradation of Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings, predicting that they would be bent to serve only the whims and desires of the ignorant. The future was a great darkness looming before them that they had to do everything in their power to delay. That is not to say that they were always pessimistic about time, however.

The wrathful enigmatic entity known as Mahakala has long been considered a protector and preserver of the Buddha-dharma. His name is conventionally translated into English as "Great Death" or "Great Darkness," but it can also be understood as "Great Time." Traditional narratives portray him as a terrifying monster who resides in charnel grounds or graveyards, often leading a retinue of hideous beasts. He is a powerful entity, capable of devouring even earthly gods, leaving not even bones behind. He is also, however, naturally attracted to the Buddha-dharma, and thus bends towards the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha.

Using his destructive force, Mahakala subdues wicked beings of all kinds and converts them to followers of the Buddha. In Chinese and Japanese

esotericism, it's said he successfully subjugated the dakinis by swallowing them, spitting them back out only after they had renounced their man-eating ways. In Japan, he is alternatively lent a friendlier appearance as he puts the supreme compassion of the Buddhas into practice; that of a smiling portly man with a bag of treasure, delivering prosperity to those in need. And so the hideous darkness that lurks in the graveyard, the place we all inevitably end up time and time again, can be seen as an ally rather than a foe, and fear of the dark is diminished.

When reading critical assessments of our current state of affairs and predictions of our demise at the hands of cold electrical beasts of our own creation, it is incredibly easy to become demoralized and consider turning away from greater society as a whole. After all, who wants to help a civilization with such a deeply ingrained death drive? How does one even go about accomplishing such a monumental task as transforming the flow of time into an ally rather than a ghoulish specter? In my view, it is done by making the earth itself tremble.

A Deleuzoguattarian machinic lens places desire as the most basic circuit of our reality; nothing exists that is outside of its domain. However, Buddhism sees such desire as the 8th link in a 12-link chain of causation starting with ignorance. Ignorance results in karma, which gives way to consciousness, which leads to name and form, which work in tandem with

sensation, which leads to desire, then attachment, which constructs our perceived existence and finally leads to birth and death (i.e. samsara). If one hacks away at the root of suffering, the other links in the chain are also automatically conquered.

This is what gives the Buddha-dharma its profound transformative effects, effects that have been attested to since the birth of Shakyamuni's transformation body thousands of years ago. Because the true Buddha exists outside of this karmically transformed world, he sees our plight from the outside and takes pity on us, and therefore he re-enters our realm and teaches us in an infinite number of ways. Outwardly, he appears as an intruder or even an opponent; Trailokyavijaya subjugates Mahesvara by stomping him into the dirt; Yamantaka terrifies the god of death with his awe-inspiring blazing form and many hideous faces.

The two defeated gods once considered themselves masters of the universe only to have themselves humbled because there is nothing in this realm that is outside of Buddhahood. In truth, we are the ones in his domain; his pure crystalline Buddha field that we foolishly perceive as a house on fire while taking deranged pleasure from the white-hot licks of the flames. Once our foolish ignorance is made clear to us, it's natural for our consciousness to readjust to our newfound wisdom on a profound level.

This purifying effect is what causes the earth to tremble. Material analysis can provide us with some insight into the human condition, but only up to a certain point. Since its blade does not pierce to the true quivering heart of the matter, it cannot hope to shake the world, much less place Mt. Sumeru into the palm of one's hand. The Buddha can accomplish this and far more, yet people still place so much more stock in the material or in Rationalism. The mission before us followers of the Buddha-dharma is to change that and make clear how farcical their position is. Perhaps they will complain and mock us in our attempts to do so, but when it comes time for the showdown they will not be able to argue that their beliefs have brought them and the rest of society to any sort of true liberation.

The golden bodhisattvas seemingly disappeared into the depths of the earth after Shakyamuni Buddha bestowed the Lotus Sutra unto them, but this was a mere show. They've never left us, and will not leave as long as the dharma expounded in the Lotus Sutra survives. They are simultaneously our past and future, converted since the remote past to the path of the bodhisattva in order to lead other sentient beings to liberation. They abide in the realm of empty space, constantly manifesting in countless ways to fulfill their ocean-like vows. Those who promulgate the Lotus dharma may find themselves among their ranks, driving the realm of samsara closer to the Pure Land of Shakyamuni Buddha with each passing moment;

sweeping away the dust and mud of the passions to reveal the true glistening face of Saha. The sutra says:

> These Bodhisattvas, immense, inconceivable and beyond measure, endowed with magic power, wisdom, and learning, have progressed in knowledge for many kotis of Æons.
>
> It is I who have brought them to maturity for enlightenment, and it is in my field that they have their abode; by me alone have they been brought to maturity; these Bodhisattvas are my sons.
>
> All have devoted themselves to a hermit life and are assiduous in shunning places of bustle; they walk detached, these sons of mine, following my precepts in their lofty course.
>
> They dwell in the domain of ether, in the lower portion of the field, those heroes who, unwearied, are striving day and night to attain superior knowledge.
>
> All strenuous, of good memory, unshaken in the immense strength of their

> intelligence, those serene sages preach the law, all radiant, as being my sons.
>
> Since the time when I reached this superior (or foremost) enlightenment, at the town of Gaya, at the foot of the tree, and put in motion the all-surpassing wheel of the law, I have brought to maturity all of them for superior enlightenment.
>
> These words I here speak are faultless, really true; believe me, all of you who hear me: verily, I have reached superior enlightenment, and it is by me alone that all have been brought to maturity. [4]

I want to note that I am not claiming that humanity can prevent itself from eventual species-wide death. That would be foolish, as all existence is transient, and the world of transformation will never stay the same, no matter how much you want it to. But the future does not necessarily have to be cold and cruel. Shakyamuni Buddha set out to establish a path towards alleviating the suffering of all beings, so it would be the height of foolishness not to take such an opportunity. Even if humanity does indeed perish, perhaps even at its own hands, the true mystic law that Shakyamuni set out to convey will always be there. It was not only human beings in Shakyamuni's vast assemblies after

all, but dragons, garudas, earth spirits, and worldly gods as well. Buddhahood is universal, all-encompassing, and indestructible.

Many of the modern Buddhists who write for mainstream publications and such tend to underplay the salvatory and transformative nature of the Buddha-dharma and would rather sell it as almost a form of "self-help"; a way to cope with the modern world and make peace with our collective karmic circumstances. While I can certainly see the utility in such a thing, this is ultimately a form of Buddhism severely lacking in vitality and urgency which, in this tradition-robbed world obsessed with plastic approximations and cheap excitement, is a veritable death sentence.

Perhaps this is why so many have had their beliefs so easily co-opted by the Neoliberal monster. It is not enough to merely liberate one's own mind and anticipate one's extinguishment. As long as the wheel of samsara still turns inside the heads of other sentient beings, there will be no respite from the countless gashes and cuts we must suffer.

This is why more modern Buddhists must have spikes. They need to push boundaries instead of reinforcing conventional modes of thought, and exude vitality instead of a marketable faux-tranquil lethargy. Yamantaka converted Yama through a terrifying monstrous appearance and Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva appears as the red-faced King Enma to sinners in the underworld because transformative wisdom and

compassion can appear frightening to those stuck in a malformed mode of being that is not rooted in ultimate truth. It is inevitable that some will have their sensibilities offended, but over-agreeableness in the midst of this state of affairs will only lead to concessions being made in service of the roaming beast of the market. If we are to become the catalysts for any significant societal shift, we must first learn to be living instead of dead.

Perhaps this is why that mad laughing god Matara plays the drum and demands that others dance along. After all, a drum beat such as his can make the world tremble, as long as there are listeners to hear it. Should we fail to appear, the drumbeat will go unnoticed, reverberating through space and out into the great dark unknown. Yet people in our age of decline are starting to wake up from their zombie-like slumber, their minds bolting from their dreary spiritual complacency as if wrenching oneself out of a nightmare.

Somewhere far away, one can hear the thundering sound of the earth beginning to shift and creak as the great darkness lifts ever so slightly, and from the cracks that appear in the earth, one can vaguely make out the glowing faces of countless hidden bodhisattvas, waiting for the moment to arrive when they can pour into the atmosphere and reshape the land into a pure Buddha field.

Maybe that is one explanation for why the mad god laughs.

SOURCES FOR PART V

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ADDENDUM: THE PSYCHOGEOGRAPHICAL CATHEDRAL

After reviewing my first edition of The Mad Laughing God, a colleague of mine recommended that I look into a failed art movement from the latter half of the 20th century called the “Situationists,” as the hypotheses and goals of their movement seem to at least in part overlap with my own. Of course, hearing that such a movement “failed” was enough to perk my ears up. When one speaks of “artistic movements,” it is not usually in terms of success or failure, but now that I have read more than a few key texts from the group, I believe that the designation of “failed” is incredibly apt.

The group’s founder is considered to have been the Marxist writer Guy Debord, most famous for his book “Society of the Spectacle,” wherein he covers the many mechanisms of control wielded by the collective governing force of the titular society, which he refers to as “The Spectacle.” This “Spectacle” is somewhat similar to what I have sometimes dubbed “the monster” or “the blob” in my own work, working its influence over seemingly every corner of our existence, from language to identity (all “fluid aspects of human activity”), and bending us to its purposes, with the end result being total alienation and the slow degradation of daily life. Debord writes.

> The reigning economic system is a vicious circle of isolation. Its technologies are based on isolation, and they contribute to that same isolation. From automobiles to

> television, the goods that the spectacular system chooses to produce also serve it as weapons for constantly reinforcing the conditions that engender "lonely crowds." With ever-increasing concreteness the spectacle recreates its own presuppositions. [1]

He illustrates the difficulties of rebelling against a system that subsumes and repackages all potential opposing forces as commodity while presenting controlled opposition that can function as a release valve without letting the “spectators” leave the realm of the greater “spectacle,” writing:

> The false choices offered by spectacular abundance - choices based on the juxtaposition of competing yet mutually reinforcing spectacles and of distinct yet interconnected roles (signified and embodied primarily by objects)- develop into struggles between illusory qualities designed to generate fervent allegiance to quantitative trivialities. [1]

It has gotten to the point where, as Debord puts it, “we no longer see anything else; the world we see is the world of the commodity,” and thus all perceived

alternatives can only lead back to further reinforcing the system they were meant to combat.

Debord's work differs from mine in a few obvious respects. First is his focus on sensory stimulation's role in maintaining the aforementioned system of perpetual commodification. He puts particular emphasis on the sense of sight as the system's primary means to administer its prescribed hyperreality to those who live within it, hence his designation of this zeitgeist "The Spectacle." He describes the process like this:

> When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings - figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behavior. Since the spectacle's job is to use various specialized mediations in order to show us a world that can no longer be directly grasped, it naturally elevates the sense of sight to the special preeminence once occupied by touch: the most abstract and easily deceived sense is the most readily adaptable to the generalized abstraction of present-day society. [1]

I have not given this particular facet too much consideration in my writing. Not because it isn't true, of course. As a Buddhist, I am well aware of the fallibility of man's sensory experience and how it can interplay

with his desires (Mara's daughters can take on many different attractive forms, after all). Rather this topic has become so ubiquitous in our social media-obsessed age that allocating significant page space to it feels redundant.

The audiovisual hyperreality of the online world has bled into "real" physical life in such vertigo-inducing ways that the distinction between the "hyper" and "real" real is more blurry than ever. The "profile," it can be said, is now our preeminent means of communicating with each other, thus the "entrepreneurial-self" and consumption-based identity reign supreme as kings of the collective consciousness, while the material "object" is the eternal fixation of their desire, always just out of reach like a carrot on a string held in front of an ass' muzzle.

The second difference, however, is far more stark. Debord is a Marxist Communist, and makes this slant very clear in his writing as he takes a sword to the many other Socialist movements throughout recent history who he saw as having failed to prevent the "Society of the Spectacle" from gaining ascendance (ironically, considering the ultimate failure of his own revolutionary movement). While his application of Leftist theory likely led to many of the more astute observations he provided his readers, I feel that this was also a hindrance to his purposes in the long run, something I will explain after some more necessary exposition.

While “Society of the Spectacle” offers much in the way of descriptions of modern circumstances and picking apart various Leftist defeats of the past, there is little prescription. Outside of typical application of Critical Theorist techniques, what he believed people should do in order to escape their hideous state of affairs is instead elaborated upon in Debord’s various Situationist treatises. In these short works, he outlines the primary goal of the “Situationist” movement, namely to “create situations” that will be able to separate people from the domain of the seemingly ever-present Spectacle and place them into an environment that can be altered for the purpose of breaking through false consciousness and leading men towards more liberated and “real” lives.

Due to this rather eccentric raison d’etre, there are very few works of art which have been left behind by the Situationists as evidence of their existence. After all, a “situation” would be something ephemeral and purely experiential in nature. However, there is a clear logic in this direction. If the creep of all-consuming commodification has taken hold of both time and space in near totality, the only option would be to fabricate a new context into which an individual could be placed. In Debord’s 1957 “Report on the Construction of Situations,” he described this process as “the concrete construction of momentary ambiences of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality.” [2]

This endeavor could encompass a space as small as a single room, or potentially an entire city, as Debord and the others who joined the Situationist movement believed that even architecture played a part in the society-wide Capitalistic Spectacle, and would also be subject to reconstruction. In a 1953 essay, the Situationist Ivan Chtcheglov called for “buildings charged with evocative power, symbolic edifices representing desires, forces and events, past, present and to come. A rational extension of the old religious systems, of old tales, and above all of psychoanalysis, into architectural expression,” turning all of urban design into a series of “cathedrals.” He continues: “This project could be compared with the Chinese and Japanese gardens that create optical illusions, with the difference that those gardens are not designed to be lived in all the time.” [2]

Chtcheglov’s illustration concludes with the concept of an entire experimental city wherein each district is meant to evoke a different feeling or emotion, something that Debord borrows and calls “states-of-mind districts.” “Architecture must advance by taking emotionally moving situations, rather than emotionally moving forms, as the material it works with,” Debord continues in his report, “and the experiments conducted with this material will lead to new, as yet unknown forms.” [2]

As this statement implies, the entire idea of “creating situations” is experimental in nature, or rather

it's a theoretical "psychogeographical" trial-and-error approach to solving the problem of the "society of the spectacle" which would, in theory, lead to the development of new human desires and the creation of an entirely novel form of society. "This is our entire program, which is essentially transitory," Debord writes in the report. "Our situations will be ephemeral, without a future. Passageways." The journal "Internationale Situationnaliste" published an article called "Preliminary Problems in Constructing a Situation," which expanded on these concepts, introducing temporary roles such as "director," or "psychogeographer" (i.e. one who studies the "psychogeographical" effects of particular "situations") which would supposedly be outgrown once the Situationalist project moved into a non-hierarchical state. [2]

The baby steps formulated to work towards such large scale experiments were techniques like "derive" and "detournement." The former is described by Debord in the essay "Theory of the Derive" as when "one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there." [2]

Debord provides the mental image of tadpoles swimming around a circular tank seemingly at random as the ideal state for this practice. A derive can theoretically be done at many different venues, from

abandoned areas of a city to a field out in the wilderness, and can last anywhere from mere hours to several months, potentially in many different environments. Essentially, it is a crude form of "psychogeographical" study which was meant to lay the groundwork for larger-scale Situationist projects.

"Detournement" is the placement of prior existing pieces of art or architectural pieces into new contexts, through which different reactions could be evoked. Debord explains in the essay "Detournement as Negation and Prelude: "The two fundamental laws of detournement are the loss of importance of each detourned autonomous element-which may go so far as to completely lose its original sense-and at the same time the organization of another meaningful ensemble that confers on each element its new scope and effect." [2] This has the benefit of being both deconstructive in the removal of the work's original meaning and reconstructive in its placement in the ensemble.

This particular technique is one that I find fascinating, as it's easily observable in life. One only has to look at Kazimir Malevich placing his famous "Black Square" painting into a gallery's religious icon corner or activists installing the "Fearless Girl" statue in front of Wallstreet's Charging Bull to see how a work's environmental context can drastically impact its meaning (Side note, but if there is an image that better represents the flaccid nagging Leftism of the first quarter of the 21st century better than a statue of a

young girl scolding a mighty raging bull, I have not seen it). There was also a comical incident in 2016 where a teenager left his glasses on the floor of an art gallery, prompting curious examination from onlookers and even leading to some attendees taking photos of the incredibly mundane object.

Even with some of the basic foundation laid, however, it goes without saying that the lofty artistic ambitions of Debord and the other early Situationists were never achieved, despite the assured confidence they seemed to exude and the demeaning posture they took when addressing others. “Disperse, fragments of art critics, critics of fragments of art. The Situationist International is now organizing the integral artistic activity of the future. You have nothing more to say,” the group wrote in a 1958 leaflet distributed at the International Assembly of Art Critics in Brussels, Belgium. “The Situationist International will leave no place for you. We will starve you out.” [2] While the collective retained the “Situationists” moniker, they had largely abandoned the artistic side of their mission by the mid-60s and instead fell into dreary written elaboration on Leftist theory and political antagonism, with the group’s many writings being their lasting legacy.

While doing the research for this essay, the reasons for the group’s failure seemed incredibly obvious, almost humorously so, for there is a form of thought that has accomplished almost exactly what

Debord and the others had laid out, and has done so for well over a thousand years: that being religion. Even in the hobbled state which it exists in today, religions still utilize the “creation of situations” in every aspect of their presentation, from the dress of the clergy to the places of worship they construct in order to bring adherents to a state of transcendent religious awe (the standout exception to all of this is American Protestantism, which has rid itself of most conventional aesthetic trapping in service of a more simplified approach. While advantageous for a time, this may have been to the faith’s detriment in the long run). This is why Chtcheglov, in the treatise cited above, compares his theoretical experimental city to a series of “cathedrals.”

Furthermore, the techniques most established religions utilize in accomplishing this have been honed over more than a thousand years, meaning they have far more to draw on than the Materialist Situationists, who were essentially starting from zero with none of the institutional resources that religions have traditionally wielded to their advantage (e.g. the favor of powerful monarchs).

Most disadvantageous of all was the driving ethos behind the group. As I said earlier, these people were first and foremost Materialists, meaning appeals to a transcendent power or the fate of the “soul” after death would have been obvious self-sabotage. This meant that the religious intoxication which inspired so much dedication to churches and religious factions was

nonexistent, substituted by the meandering sowing of discontent through the lens of Leftist theory which, after the artistic flame of the group fizzled out, was all they managed to produce. This was enough to stir political action among young French Socialists, but it was not enough to accomplish anything close to what Debord and the others had originally envisioned.

The Situationists were certainly aware that religion had this kind of power. But did Debord explore religion in his writing? Certainly, and he had a very unfavorable Materialist view towards it which was rooted in the idea of the appropriation of “time” by forces of oppression. In the narrative he provides in his book “Society of the Spectacle,” man first had a “cyclical” view of time, coinciding with the cycles of the days, seasons, and stars. This is reflected in ancient mythology, which views the cosmos as being cyclical (Central American and Vedic mythology are prime examples of this). This changed along with societal circumstances, as rulers wielded the power of mythology in order to legitimize their position. Debord writes:

> The masters who used the protection of myth to make history their private property did so first of all in the realm of illusion. In China and Egypt, for example, they long held a monopoly on the immortality of the soul; and their earliest officially recognized

> dynasties were nothing but imaginary reconstructions of the past. [1]

These faiths were later supplanted by what Debord calls “semihistorical religions,” a category in which he places the Abrahamic faiths. To him, these were a compromise “between the cyclical time that still governed the sphere of production and the irreversible time that was the theater of conflicts and regroupings among different peoples,” so essentially a more advanced synthesis between the cyclical time of very early man with the irreversible time that was allegedly appropriated by the rulers of old. While they open up this “irreversible time” to their adherents, Debord insists that this is only “in the realm of illusion,” and claims that the faiths still subjugate irreversible time by “placing themselves at the other end of it,” effectively rendering themselves a source of hyperstitious prophecy.

It is the proposed illusory quality of these faiths that leads Debord to dub them the true predecessors to the dreaded “Spectacle” of the modern era that combines irreversible time (which it uses to bolster its perceived legitimacy) with the cyclical time of the market, work day/week, and production cycles.

In my opinion, Debord’s perspective on this is stunted by his adherence to Materialism. When we look at early mythology from places like China and Japan, it is indeed obvious that it was interlinked with governance (as religion always is to at least a certain

extent). From China's Fuxi, Shennong, and Yellow Emperor to Japan's Okuninushi-no-kami, Amaterasu-Okami, and Emperor Jimmu, the gods were well established as the predecessors of later rulers, thus granting them a sense of divine right. However, there is deception in merely pointing to this as the entire truth, as there is also a lot of theological nuance to many of these early mythological frameworks, as exemplified by my interpretations of Japan's creation myth in Part 2 of this essay series.

Edo era Kokugaku scholars like Kamo no Mabuchi also saw in some of the old stories and texts a kind of purity and sincerity that was lacking in later spiritual or philosophical frameworks. While Mabuchi criticized Confucianism as a superficial doctrine that did not truly reach the hearts of men and was thus never truly implemented, he saw preserved texts like the Manyoshu of Japan and Tao Te Jing of China as evidence of the aforementioned purity that these peoples once possessed far back in the "age of the gods." He writes in a 1765 essay:

> Examining the principles that were created by wise men, we notice that they did not suit the will of heaven and thus were never put into practice. Therefore, the words of Laozi, to act in compliance with the nature of heaven and earth, suits the governing of everything under heaven. When one

> reads the words of Laozi, you realize that the hearts of the Chinese originally were sincere. They were sincere like the poetry of the ancient Japanese mentioned above. [3]

Indeed, when one examines the ancient religions and myth arcs more closely, it becomes abundantly clear that there is within all of them a striking out towards the true nature of all things, the desire for which is embedded deep within the heart of man. This is a facet that is quite easily overlooked when viewed through the one-dimensional lens of Leftist historical Materialism. Moreover the continued survival of these texts and tales even in our overwhelmingly secular and materialistic society is a testament to how much they still reverberate with the human spirit.

Just as Debord describes, Buddhism does indeed subjugate “time,” both cyclical and irreversible, by placing the entirety of the cosmos within the palm of the Buddha. However, if the Buddha represents supreme truth beyond that minute understanding of existence which the Materialists cling to, why would this be any grounds for opposition? Would it not be better to give oneself over to that truth rather than fight it?

As a Buddhist, I certainly see the worth in the aesthetic ideas proposed by Debord, but they are also aims that can be accomplished through the application of prior existing methods to our current circumstances.

For instance, the construction of a beautiful and clean home altar can transform one's living space into a personal temple, thus affecting their daily state of mind. It would also be worth considering the creation of small temple or shrine-like institutions where believers can congregate in the absence of proper temples and as an alternative for the bland secularized "meditation center" that has become more prevalent as of late, and designing these to appeal to the aesthetic sensibilities of said believers and bring them closer to the eternal mystic law of the Buddha-dharma.

Regardless, we are on the ground floor of a blossoming dharmic movement in the Western world and the possibilities are plenty, for we have a faith in something greater than ourselves that Materialists like the Situationists could only dismiss as "illusion" in their stifled worldview. While they were resigned to look inward and ruminate on the momentary "emotions" or "feelings" that struck them in their clumsy self-experimentation, we can look outward at the massive and profoundly interconnected world of transformation, as well as beyond it, for our inspiration, unshackled from petty fleeting human whims and passions. As Shakyamuni Buddha said in the Nirvana Sutra:

> "The Buddha-nature is great faith. Why? Because of faith, the Bodhisattva mahasattva can indeed be perfect in

> danaparamita up to prajnaparamita [i.e. the highest level of wisdom].” [4]

This is a gift that lets one float through the air and walk through fire, so surpassing Materialists in the pursuit of a better future is a mere trifle. Let us be thankful for the gift bestowed upon us and continue pushing forward into the unknown.

As always, thank you all very much for reading.

-JIGOKUREN

SOURCES FOR ADDENDUM:

[1] Debord, Guy (1967), translated and annotated by Ken Knabb (2014). *The Society of the Spectacle*. The Bureau of Public Secrets. Berkeley, California, The United States of America.

[2] Debord et al (1981), edited and translated by Ken Knabb (2006). *The Situationist International Anthology*. The Bureau of Public Secrets. Berkeley, California, The United States of America.

[3] Kamo no Mabuchi et al, translated by John R. Bentley (2017). *An Anthology of Kokugaku Scholars 1690-1898*. Cornell University's East Asian Program. Cornell University. Ithaca, New York, The United States of America.

[4] Shakyamuni Buddha, translated by Kosho Yamamoto (1973). *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*. Dr. Tony Page. PDF e-book edition, 2007.